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by PETER FIELD

First Magazine Publication

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WESTERN ACTION

Volume 12 December 1947 Number 2

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

RAVAGED RANGE
. . . . . By Peter Field 10

It didn't seem to make sense, these pilgrims coming into Dutch Springs suddenly, all interested in buying up ranches in Powder Valley. Then, when a mysterious plague of blackleg spread across the range, when Pat Stevens' wife was suddenly kidnapped, and an oldtimer murdered, it all began to fit into a single, sinister pattern!

SHORT STORIES

STRIKE 'IM OUT . . . . . By Eric Thorstein 82
Hart Trumbull wasn't dishonest, but he was tricky — and his partner was worried about what Hart might be up to!

PATTERSON'S BOOTS AND BOOTHILL . . . . . By John T. Lynch 91
A true story of the bad man who wanted to die with his boots off!

WIN A HOTEL—TWO BUCKS! . . . . . By Rex Whitechurch 98
A true story of one of the most fantastic lotteries ever conducted.

WHIZZERS . . . . . By The Cowpoke 107
Tall tales of the old West

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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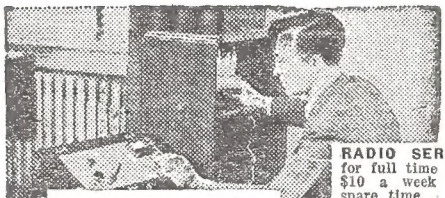

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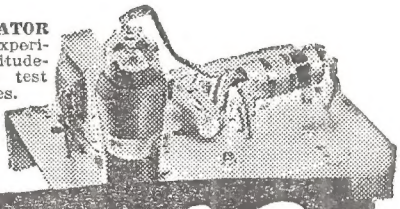

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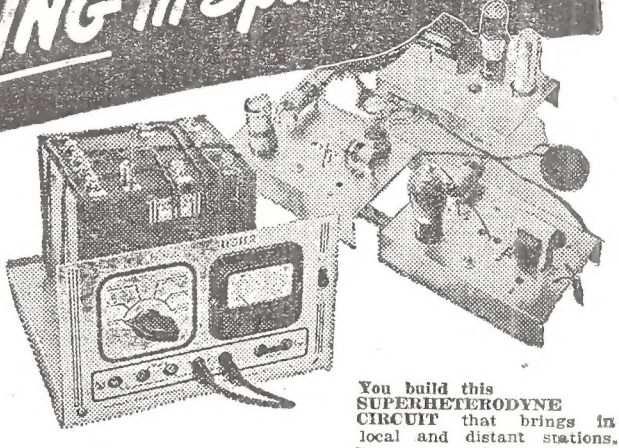

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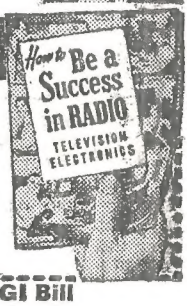

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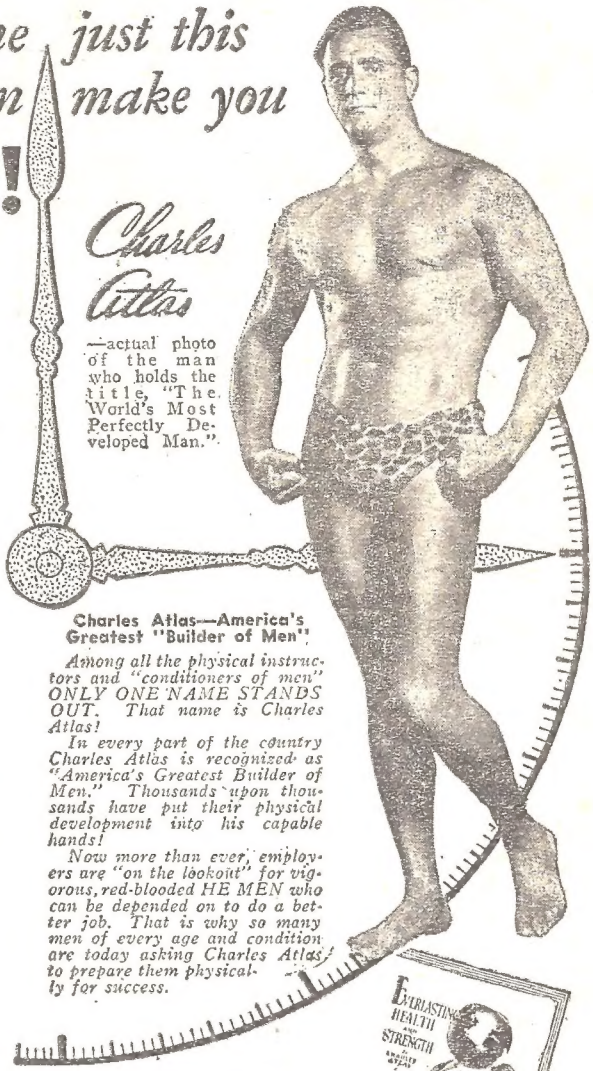

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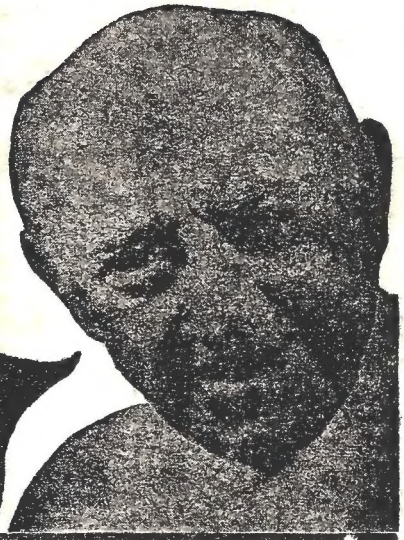

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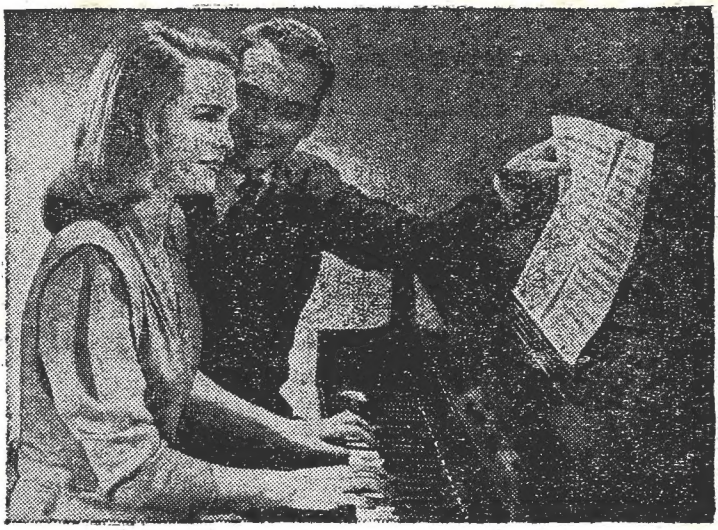

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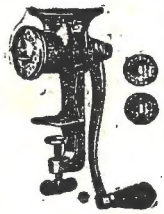

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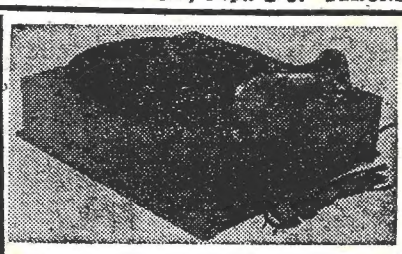

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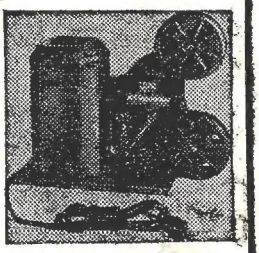

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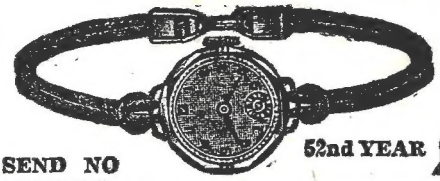
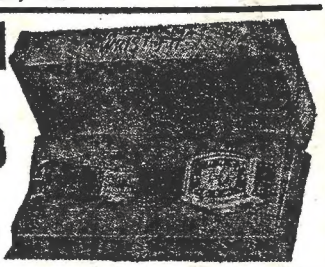


52nd YEAR



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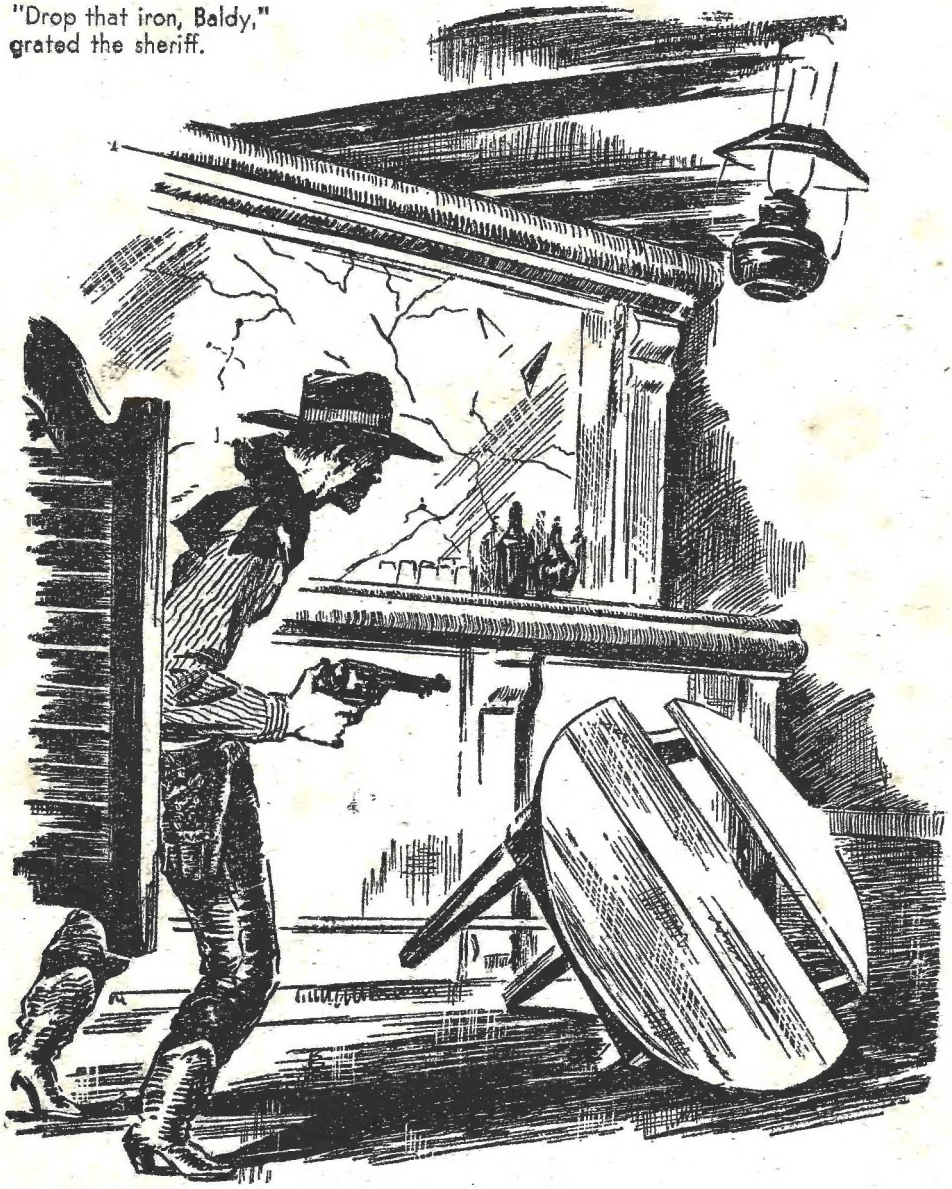
"Drop that iron, Baldy," grated the sheriff.

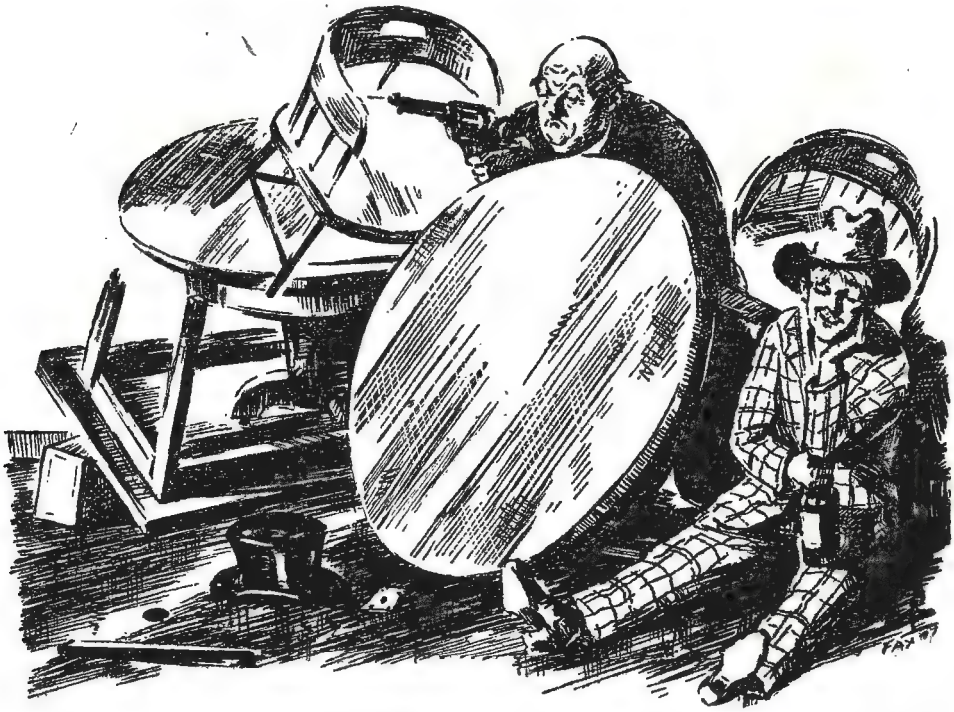


RAVAGED RANGE

Featuring Sam Sloan, Pat Stevens, and One - Eyed Ezra

By Peter Field

"You have a debt to pay this Stevens, Beck. Like all desperados, your mind runs along a single track — kill, kill, kill. Yet your vengeance can be far more effective; you can make every hour of Stevens' existence a living death, you can blacken his life, inflict the torments of hell. Then, in the end, you can — if you wish — mercifully kill him." And the plot to destroy Pat Stevens also called for the complete ruin of Powder Valley!



1

NUMBER 11051 clumsily scratched a tiny cross on the rough cement of the rock-walled cell. Bent nail clutched in the gnarled fingers of his left hand, he straightened, and somberly regarded the orderly rows of minute check marks—a nick for each day, a cross for each week. "Six more sun-ups," he muttered, "and I'll be outa this lousy sinkhole then—" A tigerish light burned in his eyes, deepset above a hawkish beak of a nose. His fists clenched convulsively.

"Then what?" The derisive voice of his cell-mate cut like an edged blade through the gloom.

Number 11051 swung round with a snarl. The yellow light of a kerosene lamp, hung upon a peg on the wall of the broad corridor outside, flowed wanly through the bars and traced a sinister patchwork upon his bleak features, deep-etched with the bitterness of long brooding.

He thrust his right hand, fingers outstretched, towards the other. The thumb and forefinger were gone and no more than a stump remained of the middle finger. "I'm gonna pay off f'r this, and eight years in this damned stinkin' hole. A two-bit sheriff shot

off them brug-hooks and railroaded me inter this dump." His yellow teeth bared in a mirthless grin. "Yes siree, watch me git Pat Stevens' ears—"

"Quit raving like a fool, Beck!" The voice that came from the shadows of the upper bunk was contemptuous. "With that crippled gun-hand, Stevens will plug you like a setting hen."

"I kin handle an iron with my left," rasped the other. "And the son ain't got peepers in the back of his conk. Afore long there'll be another widder in Powder Valley and this hombre u'll skeedaddle over the Rio Grande."

"Powder Valley!" There was surprise in the sharp exclamation.

"Yep. Lays northeast of Spanish Peaks. This Stevens hairpin is sheriff. Crippled me histing the bank at Dutch Springs."

"H'm!" The incisive voice was speculative. "Let me get the picture. First, his wife?"

"Best lookin' filly this side of Frisco."

"Devoted husband?"

"Crazy about the skirt," replied Number 11051 indifferently, carefully concealing the nail in the cuff of his grey dungarees.

"Verily the gods smile!" murmured the other. His voice rose. "Has it ever struck you, Beck, that there are more effective punishments than death?"

"What yuh drivin' at?"

"You have a debt to pay this Stevens. Like all desperados, your mind runs along a single track—kill, kill, kill. Yet your vengeance can be far more effective; you can make every hour of Stevens' existence a living death, you can blacken his life, inflict the torments of hell. Then, in the end, you can—if you wish—mercifully kill him."

Number 11051 glared at the white blur of the speaker's face, his brow creased in perplexity. "How-come? They claim yore a devil, Dook, but I shore don't follow yore trail."

The other's voice dropped to a guarded whisper. He breathed three words.

Beck gestured angrily with his maimed hand. "No soap! Pat Stevens u'd dog me t'hell. Me fer a slug—between the ears!"

HEAVY BOOTS thudded monotonously along the corridor.

"Button up!" growled Number 11051. Silently, he slunk against the rock wall as a guard slowly paced by. The footsteps died in the distance.

"Listen!" Again the voice from the bunk, sharp, with the incisiveness of a leader. "I can show you a revenge rich enough to satisfy even your harsh soul—and riches beyond your dreams. Another month and my rap is up. The mob in Chicago has tapped something big, so damn big that if you spill a word of this you're booked for boothill—pronto. Remember that, Beck! Now chew on this." The voice sank low and Number 11051 thrust his gaunt face closer, smoldering eyes veiled and suspicious as a cat's.

"Wal, who gives a damn!" he demanded truculently, when finally his cell-mate subsided into silence. "I wanna git Stevens."

"Wait, my bull-necked friend!" continued the mocking voice. "Use your grey matter! Figure what that means. Parched prairie now not worth a dollar an acre will skyrocket to twenty, thirty, fifty dollars. My boys can tap unlimited capital. We'll beat the world to the punch, in other words, buy the land first—for resale."

"But ef them mossback sod-busters won't come thru?"

A soft chuckle came from the bunk. "Our methods are usually—very effective."

"And Pat Stevens?" persisted Number 11051.

"Is the one obstacle. I understand he's kingpin in Powder Valley. Now, if you'll follow my suggestion, he'll have trouble enough on his hands without worrying about a bunch of squawking ranchers. You'll keep him busy and we'll get busy. When the pay-off comes, my friend, you'll wade in dollars. Want a slice of a sweet deal?"

Number 11051 scratched his bony chin with the stump of his middle finger. "Lissens like a pipe dream t' me," he grumbled. "'Sides, it's a life stretch ef I tangle my rope." His

head jerked up, eyes narrowed. "How'd I know you're on the up-and-up?"

The other smiled in the gloom. "You've sweated out an eight-year term, my friend. I've been incarcerated eight months of a ten-year sentence—paroled on account of incipient T. B." He simulated a hollow cough. "That calls for cash and pull aplenty. My mob has both. Take a hand—it's a cinch! Think of the hell you'll give Stevens! Risk? Bah, there's no risk, our way."

DUTCH SPRINGS dozed in the furnace heat of mid-day. Lean grey-shirted Pat Stevens, sheriff, tilted back his chair under the wooden awning outside the box-like Jewel Hotel and stretched his long limbs with a lazy yawn. His friendly grey eyes drifted over the scattering of ponies drooping at the hitch rails, dwelt upon the deserted plank walks and the weathered false fronts of the saloons and stores that lined Main Street. His thoughts flew back a decade, to the days when Powder Valley was ablaze; he thought of the part he had played in the taming of the Valley and his election as sheriff by grateful citizens. He eased his twin guns forward and settled back into the chair. Well, it looked as though they didn't need a sheriff any longer. His toughest job for a month had been yanking Lanky Sawyer of the Triple V to the little adobe hoosegow to sleep off the result of liquidating a month's wages.

"Ain't you ugly enough awready, without pullin' faces?" Pat jerked into wakefulness and grinned self-consciously as a short, stocky individual hooked up a chair and dropped down beside him. The newcomer's open shirt revealed a black mat of hair upon a barrel chest. His dusty pants were stuffed into scuffed riding boots. Bright, inquisitive eyes beneath thatched brows, and a long, crooked nose, gave him the appearance of a truculent terrier. He was one of the three inseparables, Pat, Sam and Ezra, who had saddled and bridled Powder Valley.

"Jest thinking, Sam, of the old days, when a feller toted guns f'r use nót ornaments. You and me has settled down some, jest like Dutch Springs. Makes a feller feel like a worn-out saddle hawse turned out tuh graze."

"Wal, they's some likely looking colts acomin' along." Sam nodded upstreet and adroitly jerked a sack of makin's out of the pocket of Pat's dangling vest as his companion's attention was diverted.

Trailed by a curtain of lazy-drifting dust, a pinto streaked down sleeping Main Street, muzzle stretched forward, ears laid back, tail streaming, its flashing hooves pounding a swift tattoo on the hard-baked ground. The lithe figure of a boy swayed easily in the big double-cinched saddle. A huge sombrero, secured by a leather chin strap, shaded his eager features and searching grey eyes.

"Hi, dad!" He yanked the lathered pinto to a sliding halt at sight of the two men. Sam spat dust and chuckled as the boy swung from leather, dropped his reins to the ground and ducked under the hitch rail through the grey fog he had stirred up.

"Mom says we gotta tote home some canned cow, lots of airtights and a sack of flour. That nester family up in Rattlesnake Gulch is sure scratchin' bottom." He paused, breathless.

"Dock," returned the sheriff reprovingly, "is thet the way tuh treat a good hawse?" He nodded towards the pinto, which stood with heaving chest and lowered head.

Quick resentment in his eyes, the boy swung to eye his mount. Impulsively, he ran out into the sun-swept street and fondled the pony's foam-flecked muzzle. "Sorry, Cactus," he said softly. "You oughta take a big bite outa my hide. Reckon I'm always in too much of an all-fired hurry."

Sam's quizzical eyes surveyed the sheriff's taut jaw muscles. "Lay off the kid, Pat. I kin remember the day when you was so full of the devil we had ta keep yuh hogtied or yuh woulda hashed up the whole danged spread."

THEIR ATTENTION was diverted as the stage from Hopewell Junction rolled into town with a jingle of harness and crunch of iron-bound wheels. Swaying down hoof-pocked Main Street on leather springs, the big yellow Concord swung in towards the hotel. Brake shoes squealed as it ground to a stop.

Life stirred anew in Dutch Springs. Punchers and townsfolk trickled out of saloons and stores, gathered around the dust-coated stage and eyed its occupants with blank poker faces. In these tranquil days this was a big event, repeated twice weekly—if the arrival of a bored drummer or a rancher back from a trip to Pueblo could be termed an event.

First out was a heavy-set, paunchy individual, in sober broadcloth, head crowned by a heavy beaver. An ornate gold chain was linked acros his tight-buttoned vest. As he decorously shook a loose linen duster, his shrewd eyes, buried in bulging rolls of fat, flicked over Pat's lounging figure and the twin guns dangling from the broad leather belt sagging around the sheriff's lean waist. He carefully re-buttoned his duster, grabbed a leather valise and waddled towards the hotel entrance.

Behind him, a ruddy-cheeked young fellow in a loose fitting tweed suit and neat pearl-grey Stetson stepped leisurely down into the dust. He stared back at the still-faced loungers and surveyed the paint-peeled facades of Main Street with languid curiosity. The observant Pat sensed a polished hardness that the pilgrim's affectation covered like a velvet glove. His bland blue eyes were hard as glass. The uncompromising set of his jaw and the tight line of his lips belied the vacuous grin that hovered around his mouth. Before moving, he carefully stuffed the bowl of a well-seasoned briar from a leather tobacco pouch and called imperiously to the bewhiskered stage driver. "I say, old boy, bring my bags in, will you?" Then he followed the fat man, blandly unconscious of the driver's indignant snort.

"Ever see the like of them dog-blasted limies?" muttered Sam wrathfully in Pat's ear.

The last passenger to alight was a tall, gangling fellow in shabby broadcloth coat. A much-brushed black derby crowned his high forehead and shiny grey pants flapped around his bony shanks. From one hand dangled a battered handbag, while a long wodden tripod was jammed beneath his arm. With the other arm he nursed a black box, partially swathed in dark silk, as carefully as a new-born babe. A pair of dark glasses perched upon his long, pinched nose. Clutching his belongings, he blinked around like a long-legged maverick seeking its mother. Then hesitantly, he shambled down the street.

"B'gawd!" ejaculated Sam. "Ef thet ain't one of them photographers."

But the sheriff's attention was elsewhere. Slewed around in his chair, he followed the progress of the corpulent stranger with eyes in which friendliness was replaced by alertness.

"Hey!" snapped Sam. "You gettin' deaf as well as dumb? Lamp the photographer!"

Pat turned. "Yeah, he takes pictures," he returned dryly, "but I gotta hunch the guy I gotta watch is thet fat gazaboo. I've seen thet map afore, somewheres, and he's packing a hide-away under his left arm."

Saginaw Sam, the stage driver, muttering behind his bushy whiskers, dumped the Englishman's two valises on the plankwalk, kicked the nearer to relieve his feelings and scowled at the limey's receding back. Then he clambered up to his seat, unwound the ribbons, released the brake lever and yelled. The lumbering vehicle creaked southward and the loiterers dispersed.

Pat sauntered into the dingy hotel lobby, lined with dusty, leather-covered rockers. The dog-eared register lay open upon the showcase that served as desk. The sheriff rested his elbows on the glass counter and eyed the signatures with interest, particularly that of Mortimer H. Markham, Room 234, inscribed in a bold, free-flowing hand.

2

SHARP EYES inquisitive, the squat Sam joined Pat at the hotel desk.

"Git a line on thet gun-totin' jasper?"

"Mortimer H. Markham." The sheriff rolled the words on his tongue. "Must be some muck-a-muck tuh crave a handle like that."

"A heavyweight, eh? Wal, so's a hog," growled Sam.

"Le's rest out laigs," suggested Pat placatingly. "Mine are plumb wore out, straddlin' rockers. I kinda hanker f'r another squint at Mortimer."

He sank into one of the faded leather rockers that lined the lobby. Sam subsided beside him.

A deep growl from his squat companion, rumbling like that of an exasperated bulldog, drew his eyes to the stairway. The limey, briar pipe still clenched between even white teeth, stalked down as though he were lord of all he surveyed.

Outside, on the dusty plankwalk, his two valises lay unclaimed, where the outraged stage driver had dumped them. Their owner's blue eyes swept the lobby, deserted save for Pat and Sam. The star glinting on Pat's grey shirt proclaimed his office, but the glowering Sam, trail-stained, with unbuttoned vest, open shirt and unshaven jowls bristly with black stubble, might pardonably have been mistaken for a range tramp.

The limey sauntered over. His clean-shaven, patrician features creased in a bored smile. "Howdy, sheriff!" Then his blue eyes met Sam's hostile glare. He plunged his right hand into a pants pocket and withdrew a handful of jingling coins. Carefully, he selected a dollar and negligently pitched it towards the squat man. "Carry my bags up, will you, old chap, Room 217."

With a howl of rage, Sam leapt to his feet. The dollar hit his belt and clinked to the floor. "You dog-blasted, sheepherdin' lime-juicer," he spluttered. "Who in hell d'ye think—"

"Easy does it!" drawled Pat. But the irascible Sam tilted his unshaven jaw and thrust it into the astonished limey's pink face. "You doggoned tailor's dummy. I've a mind tuh push thet grin right through the back of yore conk."

Watching lazily through half-closed eyes, Pat saw the Englishman's smooth features grow taut, wiped clear of the foppish smile. The sunny blue eyes hardened into icy chips, but the affected drawl was as pronounced as ever. "Could you, my little rooster?"

With a hoarse yell, Sam flung at the tweeded figure, arms flailing. Pat half rose from his seat in alarm, for fear his hotheaded pard would do bodily harm to the well-tailored stranger. But he sank back with a chuckle as the young fellow swiftly ducked his assailant's swinging blows. Breathing deeply, Sam paused, then abruptly swung a haymaker at the limey's lean jaw. His knuckled fist whizzed harmlessly past as the smiling stranger swayed back. For a moment, the enraged Sam was thrown off balance by the violence of his own effort. The limey slipped in, pushed hard at the barrel chest with one soft open hand and, at the same time, neatly back-heeled his assailant.

It was done so neatly and quickly that Sam's head thumped against the uncarpeted floor and he lay outstretched on his back before he realized what had occured. Meanwhile, the limey placidly sank into his vacated chair and gazed at his recumbent form with cherubic smile.

"Thet's aplenty!" Pat's voice had a steely ring of authority as his quick-tempered partner scrambled to his feet, eager to resume the affray.

Sam glared into the sheriff's steady eyes, opened his mouth to expostulate, then swung off towards the street. "Awright, Pat, I kin wait," he choked. Midway towards the door, his head swiveled round. "But I ain't totin' the son's bags!"

"A fiery temperament!" murmured the Englishman.

"Sam's all right," chuckled the sheriff. "Just a little quick on the trigger, but a nugget in a tight spot. We tote our own baggage in Dutch

Springs. What business you in?"

"Oh, pardon me, I should have introduced myself. Quite an oversight, sheriff. My name is Montgomery, Chauncey Montgomery. I propose to engage in ranching."

AMUSEMENT danced in his companion's eyes. "How big a spread you got in mind?"

Montgomery waved a white hand vaguely. "Oh, I want lots of land, all I can purchase. Quite a number of—er—spreads."

"Say—you got big ideas."

"And the money to back them up" returned the limey complacently. He rose languidly. "Well, old boy, I suppose I must carry my luggage upstairs. Beastly nuisance, no servants. But one must rough it, I presume, in this bally West. By the way, how is the whisky hereabouts?"

"Pison!"

"How damnably disappointing!" The dude shrugged his shoulders. "But who wants to live forever?"

Pat's eyes were puzzled as they followed the Englishman's regal progress towards the hotel entrance. Either the fellow was a collosal jackass, or—Pat remembered Sam's swift upset—was running one hell of a sandy. Well, leastways, he was diverting. Dutch Springs had been mighty quiet latterly.

Another figure shook the heat-warped stairs in ponderous descent. It was Mortimer H. Markham in person. Despite the enervating heat, his bulging flesh was still encased in the tight-buttoned vest and heavy broadcloth coat. Rolls of fat layered upon the stiff white collar that girded his bull neck. Like a gigantic jelly, his protruding paunch quivered with each careful downward step.

Panting, he tacked across the lobby towards the lounging sheriff, like a stately Spanish galleon.

"My respects to the law!" High-pitched, his voice held an undertone of condescension that prickled Pat's nerves. He nodded shortly, dribbled the makin's into a cigarette paper and studied the corpulent man's fleshy features. A tricky customer, the sheriff registered mentally, as he noted the small, shrew eyes, peering warily from fleshy depths, and the thick lips, palpitating like the gills of a fat salmon. Three great solitaires flashed on the newcomer's pudgy fingers. A diamond stick-pin scintillated beneath his banked chins.

I am Mortimer H. Markham of Chicago." The stranger paused, as though he expected his listener to register awe. "I represent a group of Chicago financiers who are interested in acquiring land in Powder Valley. We have faith in this great West and are willing to back that faith with dollars. I shall value your co-operation, sheriff."

Pat rubbed his chin and squinted thoughtfully at Markham's moon-like features. "Mighty curious, this sudden interest in Powder Valley," he ruminated. "You wouldn't be working in cahoots with Mister Chauncey Montgomery." He nodded towards the stairs, which the Englishman was ascending, valise swinging from each hand.

"Most assuredly not!"

"Wal, he's a land buyer, too."

"Indeed!" Markham's voice rose in quick surprise. His bulk pivoted as he turned to eye the receding tweeded back. "Are you positive?" Suspicion gleamed in the small eyes that met Pat's cool gaze.

"I got only the gent's word." The sheriff rose and stretched.

"Use a gun?" He flung the question carelessly as he moved streetwards.

Markham's brow wrinkled in surprised reproach. "Indeed not!"

"Then why d'ye tote one?" And Pat was gone, leaving the purpling Markham gasping, resembling a newly landed salmon more than ever.

The sheriff was preoccupied as he stepped out of the shaded lobby into the glare of Main Street. He angled across the ruts towards his office behind the Courthouse. Something was afoot and intuition told him it boded ill for Powder Valley. True, ranches occasionally changed hands. Infrequently, pilgrims drifted in from the east and acquired spreads. But the arrival of two big buyers on the same stage, each determined to grab

a hunk of the valley, was more than a coincidence.

IF HE HAD been shadowing the Englishman, some thirty minutes later, he would have been still more perturbed.

With jaunty unconcern, Montgomery strolled out of the hotel and stood against the hitch rail, polished by the leather of a generation of ponies. His blue eyes searched the slumbering streets—tied ponies restlessly switching flies, riders hunkering in front of the saloons, as still as graven images, a dribble of citizens pushing through the swinging doors of the brick bank and drifting in and out of the sprawling mercantile store. His interest quickened as a gangling figure shuffled towards him along the plankwalk, clutching a tripod and silk-swathed camera. An ungainly human hairpin, the itinerant photographer shambled into each open doorway and left a business card.

Montgomery puffed placidly at his pipe and lounged artlessly against the hitch rail, apparently unconscious of the ungainly figure that slowly drew nearer and nearer.

Finally, the photographer dragged past, stopped as though in indecision and nervously extended a card towards the indifferent dude. It was inscribed:

PETER TELFORD
Photographer
Weddings—Groups—Ranches
Rates Reasonable

Half-expectantly, the thin man waited, blinking at Montgomery from behind his blue glasses.

"No photographs today, my good fellow," drawled the Englishman loudly. Then his voice dropped, became cold and clearcut. "Watch Mortimer H. Markham!"

3

A SACK OF flour balanced back of the cantle and saddle-bags swelling with air-tights, Pat jogged along the trail that writhed through the brown hills, green-veined with chaparral-choked ravines. At his stirrup rode a decorous Dock, eager eyes flicking over the sage and mesquite, ready fingers itching to draw every time a jack rabbit popped up, shook its stubby tail and zig-zagged through the sage.

Father and son emerged into a wide, park-like valley, dotted with scrub oak and framed with stately groves of pinons that clothed the surrounding slopes. At its further end, approached by a coiling wagon road, fluffling cottonwoods fronted a long, low timbered ranch house. Neat-painted outbuildings clustered in its rear.

Scattered over the valley, fat steers grazed contentedly or bunched in patches of shade. Forming a mighty backdrop, the barren Culebras towered high over the peaceful scene, bedded in a twisted chaos of canyon and gulch, stark, black peaks sharply silhouetted against the blue.

Familiar as was the scene, Pat never entered the little valley without a quickening of the pulse and stirring of deep-seated emotion. This ranch, tucked away in the hills, was his kingdom, his refuge, his home. The cares of office slipped away when he entered the quiet valley. What man could ask more, he reflected—a good wife, a fine spread, peace and serenity.

Sally, cheeks glowing from the stove, met husband and son at the kitchen door. Dock led the ponies to the watering trough. Pat swung his wife off her feet, implanted a hearty kiss on her red lips and gently set her down.

"More trouble for the Bentons," she sighed. "The baby's down with measles, the other children sickening and no food in the house. That poor woman must be worried sick."

"And her weasel of a husband is skulkin' around the Gold Eagle all day cadgin' drinks," growled Pat. "Howcome you tangled up with them doggone nesters?"

Sally smiled, her eyes twinkled. "Now don't go tough on me, Pat Stevens. Someone must give the poor things a helping hand."

"I reckon every down-and-outer in Powder Valley rides our chuck line." Pat's voice was gruff, but pride glowed in the grey eyes that dwelt upon his wife's trim figure.

"The Harknesses had an offer for their spread," commenced Sally conversationally as she busied herself at the stove. "Some dude with a most delightful accent, wants it for a r-a-a-nch."

"Reckon they better hold on."

"Why?" Sally swung round, and caught her husband's quick frown.

"They's two jaspers grabbin' land all over the valley, and I don't savvy why."

"Trouble?"

"Mebbe," Pat returned noncommittally.

"And you love it!" she accused, with a provocative smile. "You're just dying for action. That gleam in your eye is a clear giveaway."

Pat opened his mouth to expostulate, but his wife laughingly closed it with a slim hand. "Save your breath, Mr. Lawman—*I know*."

"Wal, doggone it, Sally, a feller don't hanker t' go t' seed."

"No chance of you going to seed, Pat Stevens. Action follows you like a shadow."

"Sorry you tied up to a cyclone?" he taunted playfully.

Sally tweaked his nose. "Not one little bit."

STAGE DAY again! Pat shouldered good-humoredly through the loiterers bunched in front of the Jewel Hotel and glanced into the lobby. He blinked as his eyes focused upon the tall, slightly stooped figure of Judge Archibald Bemis, standing inside the door. The judge gravely inclined his silvery head in recognition.

Pat stepped inside. "Howdy Judge! You cravin' excitement, too?"

A smile mantled the Judge's ascetic features. He was a popular figure in the Valley, an honest, patient jurist who enforced the spirit as well as the letter of the law.

"No, I must plead the call of duty, sheriff. I have been requested to extend professional courtesy to a legal light who intends to hang up his shingle in Dutch Springs—a Mr. Justus Sharman."

"Lunger?"

"Something like that. Quite a likable fellow, I understand, and well recommended."

"The town's growing, Judge. We got two land buyers and a photographer last stage. 'Pears Dutch Springs is right popular."

Outside, the crowd stirred with anticipation. The stage rolled in. Saginaw Sam swung his leaders towards the hitch rail. Brake shoes squealed and the unwieldy vehicle creaked to a stop. One passenger emerged, a slim, dark man in a grey business suit. He dropped agilely to the ground, straightened his tie and smiled around, nowise abashed by the circle of appraising poker faces.

Judge Bemis pushed forward, Pat at his heels. "Mr. Sharman?"

"At your service, sir." The newcomer briskly extended his hand. "Judge Bemis, I presume!"

As their hands met, Pat studied the new arrival from behind the judge's shoulder. The lawyer reflected friendly competency, with shrewd dark eyes, a suave smile and cultivated voice. A short, carefully trimmed black beard emphasized his judicial appearance.

Introductions completed, Judge Bemis led his colleague off in the direction of his home, a tree shaded bungalow on the west side of town.

A white-aproned barkeep wormed through the groups on the plankwalk and grabbed the sheriff's arm. "Begorra, Pat, there's trouble in the Gold Eagle."

The sheriff swung round. "Howcome?"

"That limey unloaded a pile of dinero on Baldy Benton and the pair lickered up t' celebrate. They done smashed my bar mirror. Hate t' use the scatter gun on the scalpeens."

JEERING RIDERS and shirt-sleeved townsmen jammed the batwings of the saloon and flattened their noses against the dingy windows. Pat elbowed a pathway, slid inside and stood immobile, while his

eyes adjusted to the muted light after the sun-glare of the street.

Swiftly, the scene became clear. The saloon was apparently deserted, its sawdusted floor cluttered with upset chairs and overturned tables. Jagged cracks zig-zagged across the long, gilt-framed mirror back of the plank bar. Then, in the far corner of the low-ceilinged room, Pat glimpsed a bald pate cautiously elevated above a barricade improvised from three upended tables. Beside it sat Chauncey Montgomery, propped against the wall. The limey's hair was rumpled, his tweed suit white with clinging sawdust. Upon his features sat the silly grin of the utterly and helplessly drunk. Benton clutched a big .45 with both hands and blindly plugged slugs into the bar mirror, his eyes screwed tight shut as the weapon roared and bucked.

"Git outa here!" shrilled Baldy waving his pistol. "I'm a big curly bear! Y-o-w-l!" A reverberating roar punctuated the little man's howl and the spectators outside scattered like a flock of quail as the window on Pat's left tinkled into fragments.

"Drop thet iron, Baldy!" grated the sheriff. "You, too limey."

"You ain't gonna git me!" squealed the nester. "Y-o-w-l!" Again his .45 belched flame and thunder and the bullet clanged into the brass bowl of a lamp suspended from the ceiling.

Pat grinned ruefully and dropped to the floor. He heard a click as Baldy broke his gun, the musical clink of empty shells dropping on the floor.

With a bound he was on his feet and across the saloon. Hunkered against the wall, the bemused Baldy was feverishly thrusting fresh loads into the cylinder of his iron with fumbling fingers. Pat leaned over, gathered the slack of the drink-crazed nester's shirt with a quick grab and hoisted Baldy up on his feet. With his left hand, the sheriff twisted the gun from the limey's grasp.

"Come on!" he growled resignedly, yanking the protesting nester across the sawdust with one hand and steering the staggering Englishman with the other. "You gents need a nice long sleep in a nice quiet cell."

Ten minutes later Sam hustled into the sheriff's little leanto office. "What's the fracas?" he demanded excitedly.

"Late as usual!" retorted Pat, addressing the wall. "Waits 'til the shootin's over, then he pops in with his little gun! Go out and plug some prairie dogs, Sam, ef the rust ain't eaten the innards outa thet hog-laig of yourn."

"Wal!" shot back Sam. "What'd I miss, some drunk shootin' off his mouth? I reckon you could handle thet all alone."

"Drag up a chair," invited the sheriff with a grin, "and cool off. Baldy and the limey went on a bender."

"Thet little nester runt!" Sam's voice dripped disgust. "He never owned the price of a drink."

"He sold his spread."

"Spread!" barked Sam. "You call three-twenty acres of alkali and half a dozen sway-backed mavericks a spread?"

"I guess the limey does, he paid Baldy five hundred cash f'r the deed —then helped him liquefy it."

"Holy jeepers!" breathed Sam. "Thet sage brush won't raise grasshoppers. Didn't I say all limies are loco?"

Pat shook his head. "Ef I read the signs aright, Montgomery's no lunkhead. Afore he got Baldy drunk the little weasel stuck out f'r a thousand."

Sam frowned in perplexity. "Baldy's pack-rat outfit ain't worth fifty dollars. What kind of a sandy is this limey runnin'?"

"Thet's jest what I aim tuh find out."

THE DOOR flew open and a huge chunk of bone and sinew lumbered awkwardly inside, blinking around like a big bear awakening from its winter's hibernation. His rough-hewn features, as seasoned as tanned rawhide, were topped by a shock of unruly red hair. The ferocity of his appearance was increased by a deep scar, startling white against the deep tan of his face, that cut diagonally across one eye, up over his temple into the hair. The eyelid dropped

down against his cheek. Fierce and challenging, his good eye swiveled around. A cotton shirt covered his wide shoulders. Buckskin pants were tucked into spurred boots. A holstered gun slapped against each hip.

"Yuh kin hit f'r home, Ezra," barked Sam, "the trouble's over. Me and Pat don't need no help tuh rod Dutch Springs. 'Smatter of fact, I could go it alone."

"Trouble!" roared the giant. "You ain't seen nuthin'! Blackleg's breakin' out all over the range. Tom Harkness lost six prime beef critters, every last one swole up and black. Jim Dolger's cut out three and Bill Fraser's foreman sez dead steers are lyin' on Lazy F range thicker'n fleas on a hound dawg. It's blackleg—and it's hell." A chair creaked ominously as he dropped his bulk into it and scowled at Pat's sober features.

"Blackleg!" The sheriff met Ez's fiery eye. "You plumb certain? We ain't never had thet plague in Powder Valley."

"Ain't no mistakin' it," declared the red-headed giant. "Tom opened up one of his steers, 'twas full of stinkin' red pus. I seen the same down in Senora. It's blackleg!"

"Then we gotta move, quick!" snapped the sheriff. He kicked back his chair and straightened. "You, Ezra, hit f'r the upper valley. Have 'em bury every carcase and salt their steers. You breeze south, Sam. Mebbe we kin stop it, we sure cain't cure it. Beat it, you mavericks, and keep agoin'!"

PAT HASTENED down the plankwalk to spread the bad news and speed preventive measures. No need to impress Powder Valley ranchers with the extent of the calamity. Every cattleman feared blackleg. The sober-faced sheriff knew that the range might be wiped clean of cows. There was no effective treatment for blackleg and seldom recovery. The only defense against the dread disease was prevention and quick isolation of infected stock.

Bad news spreads swifter than an eagle. Dust billowed as hard-riding punchers and bumping buckboards stampeded out of town. Every minute counted in the mad race to protect stock against infection. Desperate speed was necessary if the outbreak was to be checked.

Pat rushed through the batwings of the Gold Eagle. He could do no more until Sam and Ezra returned and he was able to gauge the extent of the outbreak.

Save for the smashed bar mirror and shattered window, signs of the recent fracas had disappeared.

Mike, the heavy-jawed barkeep and saloon owner, reached down a bottle of Pat's favorite brand. On either side of the sheriff, excited townsmen bellied up to the bar, discussing the calamity that had dropped from a clear sky.

"Trouble alwus comes in threes, begorra," announced Mike darkly. "Thet's what me ould mither used t' say. First, they wreck me saloon, thin it's the backleg. What next, I ask?"

Pat nodded absently, and poured two fingers. Disturbing thoughts were hurtling into his mind. What would better suit the two eastern land buyers than this blackleg epidemic? Unless it was checked, and checked quickly, it spelt ruination for Powder Valley. Many ranchers were burdened with heavy mortgages, most of them owed long store and feed bills, all depended upon the beef round-up in the fall to meet their obligations. The outbreak might mean bankruptcy for four-fifths of the cowmen, storekeepers, too. That meant range would sell for a song. Mighty curious that blackleg should strike Powder Valley, not just in one spot, but on half a dozen ranches, or more. A feller might reasonably suspect that infected cattle had been planted. But why in thunder would these dude land buyers risk long penitentiary sentences by maliciously spreading blackleg? Why were they grabbing range, anyway? The whole danged business just didn't make hawss sense. There were millions of acres of cheap range in the West—why pick on Powder Valley? $500 for Baldy Benton's half section! Hell, like Sam said, it

wasn't worth fifty dollars. Trouble had sure struck Dutch Springs.

With creased brow, Pat poured another.

4

BLEARY-EYED, unshaven, an abject rat of a man in patched levis and stained shirt—Baldy Benton—squirmed on the seat of a straight-backed chair in Pat's office. Beside him, cool and contemptuous, despite bristled chin and wrinkled tweeds, sat Chauncey Montgomery. Mike, from the Gold Eagle, heavy jaw outthrust, brawny arms folded across his chest, towered beside the sheriff's desk like a statue of Avenging Justice.

Pat cleared his throat. "I could hold you jaspers f'r District Court on charges of disturbing the peace, malicious damage and wanton shootin'. Maximum sentence ten years. But Mike here don't crave tuh press the charges. He figgers you lickered up on his rattlesnake juice and he's part tuh blame." Mike snorted indignantly.

"Thet being so," continued Pat imperturbably, "seein' as we don't aim to clutter the court calendar, all charges are dismissed upon payment of costs. What's the damage, Mike?"

The burly Irishman fished a crumpled sheet of paper from his vest pocket, carefully smoothed it out and read loudly: 'Wan bar mirror from Pueblo—$200; wan brass lamp from Kansas City—$20; wan winder $40; two busted chairs $10. $280 they owes me, Pat."

Montgomery yawned. "You're not totaling up bar bills now, my good fellow—$270."

Mike glared at the bland Engiishman, sucked the butt of a pencil stub and frowned darkly at the bill of damages. His lips moved as he ponderously checked the figures. Laboriously, he scrawled an addition, then read loudly, "Freight, $10, $280 like I said," with challenging stare at the supercilious debtor.

"Magnificent!" murmured the dude. "$280 it is."

"$140 apiece," snapped Pat, "and next time, it's the judge."

Montgomery produced a leather wallet, carelessly peeled seven twenties from a wad of greenbacks and tossed them on the spur-scarred desk. "Cheap at the price, by jove!" he grinned. "Now for a hair of the dog that bit me, a shave and a bath. Thanks for the hospitality, sheriff!"

The nondescript Benton pulled off his boots, uptilted them and shook a shower of currency on to the floor. Dropping on his knees, he carefully assembled and counted his hoard. Never before, thought Pat, silently watching, had the ragged loafer fingered so much dinero . . . and he frittered it away for rotgut while his wife and children starved up in the Barrens! With sulky fingers, Benton counted the money, his fine, shiny pate bent low as he reluctantly fingered the greenbacks.

Dumping the currency on the desk, he shuffled towards the door.

"Hey, where you headin' for?" demanded Pat sharply.

"The saloon," whined Baldy.

"Like hell you are! Fasten yore meathooks on thet broom and sweep out the cells, then empty the slop buckets."

"You cain't tromp on me, Pat Stevens," shrilled the nester, "I paid my fine."

"Keep that foodtrap locked," growled the sheriff, "or I'll jug yuh f'r vagrancy."

THAT DAY the air of Dutch Springs was thick with rumor and heavy with apprehension. From all parts of the valley came the same ominous report—blackleg. Townspeople gathered in jittery groups, which buzzed with low-voiced discussion. Punchers dashed in and out of town, with grim features. Even the houn' dogs slunk around the garbage cans with lowered tails and furtive growls. Cows were the life-blood of Powder Valley—and that life-blood was draining away.

Pat stood by the Courthouse and morosely gazed along the deserted hitch rails. Beyond, the yellow-green prairie rolled into the mists of dis-

tance. Already the old brick bank was filled to the doors and a slowly lengthening line of uneasy men and women stretched across its front. A bank run was in the making. It was common knowledge that the Cattlemens Bank had loaned heavily on stock and on range land. It wouldn't take more than a spark, mused the sheriff, to set that slow-moving line afire in a crazy panic, and then all hell would break loose.

He drifted along beneath the wooden canopy of the plankwalk, irked by his own impotence. However much he might suspect that the dread disease had been planted, he could do nothing unless concrete evidence was uncovered. Until Sam and Ezra rode in with their reports his hands were tied.

A pony swung into Main Street, trailed by a rising dust plume. At sight of the sheriff, the sharp-eyed, swarthy rider released a yell and kneed his mount toward the rail. He swung out of leather, eyes hard. "Some dirty sidewinder's been at work," he snapped.

"So I figgered, Sam. What's the lowdown?"

The grim-visaged Sam growled deep in his throat. "Blackleg every dang place yuh look. Bill Fraser's fighting mad on the Lazy F, lost most of his prize shorthorns. Ain't a spread got off scot-free. B'gawd, Pat, the boys out there are ripe f'r a lynchin'."

"And who'd they lynch?" inquired the sheriff dryly.

Sam shrugged, "They're liable t' string up most anyone. Bill Fraser's shootin' off about the land-buyers, figgers they planted infected cows tuh git cheap land. His boys rounded up two strange heifers—both infected."

"Strays, I reckon."

"Mebbe, but you know Bill, the stubborn old nosey-horn!"

"Where's Ezra?"

"Headin' f'r the Barrens. They's talk of strange riders around Rattlesnake Gulch. Ezra is huntin' sign."

Sudden misgiving flashed into Pat's mind. Sally had ridden up to the shack in the Gulch that morning, toting chuck to the nester family. He quickly stifled his fears. There would be a score of such reports, all false alarms, before the week was over. Probably some puncher hunting strays had been sighted near the Gulch. If blackleg hadn't broken out the incident would have meant nothing, now it started a scare and sent Ezra, a hound for tracking, on what would likely turn out to be a wild goose chase.

"You look kinda tuckered out," commented the sheriff, eyeing the sweat-stained pony and Sam's trail-stained garb.

"Been in the saddle since sun-up."

"Git a slice of steer and a pot of dip under yore belt, then stick around the office. I'm goin' tuh brace thet doggoned limey."

PAT MOUNTED the creaking stairway that led to the sleeping rooms of the two-story hotel Like a hundred other cow town hostelries, its box-like bedrooms fronted a straight, narrow corridor. A number was rudely inscribed with black paint upon each unpainted door. Odd numbers overlooked Main Street; occupants of the even numbers stared out upon a level expanse in the rear, littered with tin cans and empty whisky bottles discarded by thirsty guests.

Two kerosene lamps, bracketed on the bare plank wall, illumined the passage with yellow light. Thick with the mingled odors of lamp fumes, tobacco smoke and rotgut, the stale air bit Pat's nostrils as he scanned the doors.

At 217 he paused, knuckled the panel. A muffled 'Come in!" reached his ears. He turned the handle and pushed open the door.

Head propped up by a doubled pillow, Chauncey Montgomery lay on a brass bedstead that half filled the stuffy room, reading a book. His Oxfords were carelessly dropped on the worn square of carpet. Silk shirt open at the neck, sleeves rolled up, smoke curling ceilingward from his pipe, he presented a picture of peace and contentment. The window was wide open.

Leather-bound books were stacked on the washstand, in company with a bottle of Old Trapper and a glass. A white china pitcher stood on the floor. Two valises were heaped in a corner, one empty, the other securely locked and strapped. Clothing hung from a row of hooks on the wall. A glass-bowled oil lamp on a swinging bracket flooded the room with wan light.

The Englishman's eyebrows elevated at sight of the sheriff.

"Dear me!" he drawled. "Quite an honor! Take a chair, take two chairs!"

Pat hooked a chair up beside the bed, sat down and slowly built a smoke. Montgomery laid down his book. The sheriff noted the title, *Shakespeare's Comedies.*

Amusement danced in the dude's blue eyes. "Is this an arrest, old chap?"

"Mebbe," returned Pat laconically.

Montgomery sighed, "Life is just one surprise after another!" He rose lazily, padded across the room in his socks and held up the bottle. "How about a snifter, sheriff?"

Pat shook his head.

The Englishman addressed the bottle sorrowfully, "Methinks he rejects my poor hospitality!" The liquor gurgled as he half-filled the glass, brimmed it with water from the pitcher. With mock gravity he held the glass high, bowed, "Your health, sheriff!"

Pat nodded, and the dude tossed the drink down. The levity fled from his voice. "Now, my dear sir," he demanded crisply, "your business?"

"My business is yore business," returned Pat coolly.

"He speaks in conundrums! Elucidate, old top, my brain is dullish, day after the night before, you know."

Despite his levity, the dude's eyes were wary.

"Howcome you're buying land in Powder Valley?"

"Why does one buy land? To raise bally old cows."

"In Rattlesnake Gulch?"

"Why not?" Montgomery's voice was bland.

"It ain't cow country."

"That is purely a matter of opinion."

PAT'S GREY eyes flashed impatience. "Quit kiddin', mister! Let's lay the cards on the table. When a feller wants tuh ranch, he buys a spread, a real spread, not patches of range here, there and to hell-and-gone. You ain't a rancher, you never will be a rancher. What's yore game?" He fired the last question like a bullet.

Montgomery shrugged his shouders, eyes hard. "You heard my story and I intend to stick to it. There is no law, my good sheriff, against buying land. Why I buy it, after all, is my business." He turned to the washstand and poured another drink. "To be blunt, old boy, to hell with you and your damnably interfering ways."

Pat touched a stinker match to his smoke and puffed slowly, his eyes weighing the defiant dude. "The sentence f'r spreadin' blackleg," he commented thoughtfully, "is usually five years. A tough judge might send yuh down f'r ten."

"Again he speaks in conundrums! Blackleg! What is that? A disease or a new card game?" The dude eyed the sheriff levelly over the rim of his glass.

"You should know."

"Good heavens, man, what have I done to deserve this inquisition?" The Engishman was cleary becoming exasperated. "I am totally at a loss to comprehend your infernal innuendos. Produce your warrant, or for heaven's sake, leave me to peruse the *Comedy of Errors* in peace. The title is quite apropos."

"Wal, lissen!" Pat rose, his eyes bored into the Englishman. "Some skunk is spreadin' backleg over the range. That'll ruin the ranchers, land u'll sell f'r a song. You're buyin' land. Is thet plain?"

"So I'm the bally culprit!" Montgomery's ruddy cheeks creased in an amused smile. "Your deductions are logical, but I give you my word, sheriff, you're barking up the wrong tree.

Have you, by chance, interrogated one Mortimer H. Markham?"

"Nope, but I will, and I ain't thru with you," returned Pat curtly. He swung towards the door, "Don't overplay yore hand, mister!"

Brow wrinkled, the sheriff descended the stairs. His questioning of the Englishman had yielded nothing. Either the dude was a colossal four-flusher or he was innocent. He didn't act like a guilty man, but then, Pat had handled crooks and killers who had preserved an attitude of righteous indignation even when the rope tightened around their necks. One thing was sure, the affected Englishman was no dude rancher, seeking a spread.

Sam awaited him in the office. The squat man was fretfully pacing the floor, which was littered with half-smoked quirlies.

"Wal," he demanded eagery, "did the dood spill his guts?"

Pat shook his head. "Nope, thet gink's either running one hell of a blazer or he's as innocent as a day-old calf."

Sam snorted. "Lemme at the jasper, I'll pound it outa the son."

"With yore fists?" inquired the sheriff slyly.

"Aw, ferget it! He run a whizzer over me last time."

"You shore acted awful surprised," said Pat mildy. Again his pard opened his mouth in angry expostulation, but the sheriff laid a firm hand on his back. "You mosey back tuh the ranch, Sam. I gamble your wife's worried stiff. I gotta lay holt of Markham, mebbe he'll spill the beans. Ain't long since we was belly-achin' f'r action. Wal, we shore got it."

THE TWO jingled out. Main Street was still and darkened, save where shafts of light blotched the plankwalk from the windows of the Gold Eagle. Overhead, the lamps of heaven burned silently, massed agianst the dark velvet of the placid night.

Out on the flats beyond edge of town the swift staccato of a racing pony's hooves thrummed through the still air. Sam loosed his pony's reins from the hitch rail and stood still, head cocked. "Reckon thet's Ezra?" he queried.

Pat said nothing, but stood staring into the gloom. Again uneasy premonition seized him. Mike's doleful prophecy*"Three of a kind"—flicked into his mind. What if Sally—impatiently, he shook his head, as if to shake off vague misgivings. That stuff was for old women.

The drumming hooves were close now. Shadowy, a rider streaked down Main Street, wheeled towards the two silent men and checked his mount in a shower of dust and pebbles.

"Dock!" Pat's voice was taut.

The boy scurried under the rail, stepped up to his father, strove to speak, but the words choked in his throat.

"Easy, son!" said the sheriff gently. He slipped his arm around the boy's slight form, holding him tightly. "What's wrong?"

"Ma's lost," burst out Dock. "The sorrel drifted in after sun-down. The reins was dragging and"—his voice broke—"the saddle was empty."

5

TAUT SILENCE followed the boy's words. Pat felt his son's body quiver as the lad strove to restrain the emotion that choked in his throat.

"Mebbe the sorrel strayed," said the sheriff slowly, striving to reassure himself. "I reckon yore ma's settin' on the trail right now, son, listenin' tuh the coyotes and waitin' f'r a mount. Le's go!"

The three ponies clattered up the silent street, swung past the shacks that fringed the town and emerged on the open prairie. Sam rode beside the sheriff, Dock tagged behind.

Pat broke a long silence. "You hit

f'r home, Sam, this is an all night job. You been poundin' leather since sun-up."

"Reckon I'll stick around," growled the squat rider. "Never heard of thet sorrel strayin' afore."

His tacit admission that he thought harm had come to Sally Stevens deepened the foreboding that clouded Pat's mind. What was that Mike said— "Three of a kind." Half-angrily, he strove to banish the phrase from his thoughts, tried to convince himself that the worse Sally could have suffered was a spill. Mebbe she tied the pony and it pulled free, he thought. But cold reason told him that he was building his hopes on sand. The sorrel never was a puller. It was well-gentled and would stand until hell froze over if it was tied to the ground with trailing reins.

Sally was a dandy rider, too. Never had been thrown, as far as he knew. Then how come the sorrel returned alone?

Resolutely, the sheriff thrust the jumble of vague fears out of his mind. Mebbe they'd meet his wife on the trail, legging it back to the ranch and mad enough at the ornery hawss to gnaw the sights off a six-gun.

Scarcely a word was exchanged throughout the night ride; each was the prey of his own somber thoughts.

At last they jogged down the little valley that sheltered the spread. Steers driftd uneasily out of their path, blotched shadows in the pale moonlight.

Pat, in the lead, drew rein in the rear of the silent ranch house.

"Where's the sorrel, son?" he asked gently.

"In the barn, Dad, watered and fed."

Dock led the way across the yard swung open the barn door. A pony whinnied in the darkness. Pat struck a match, lifted down a stable lantern, touched a light to the wick. The sorrel pawed impatiently in a stall.

Sam held the lantern high, sharp eyes following the sheriff as he carefully examined the animal's hooves, fetlocks and forelegs. Pat straightened, eyes puzzled. "Nary a scratch!" He turned to the bridle, hanging from a peg, fingered the reins. "Saddle cinched good?" he inquired, over his shoulder.

"Tight as a drum, Dad," piped his son, hovering anxiously in the background.

"The hawss musta strayed," announced Pat loudly. Ever-argumentative, Sam's mouth opened to protest, but the sheriff cut him short with a quick jab of an elbow into his ribs. "You go get some shuteye, Dock," he directed.

Half-defiantly, the boy stood still, a boot sole nervously scraping the floor. "Where you going, Dad?"

"Tuh meet yuhr ma."

"Kin I go?" pleaded Dock.

"Nope!" returned his father decisively. "You've ridden aplenty. You git between the sheets, pronto."

"But mebbe ma's hurt," faltered the boy. "I ain't a mite tired, honest!"

Pat unhooked another lantern, lit it and placed it in Dock's reluctant hand. "Vamoose!" he directed firmly. "Yore ma will be home at sun-up. 'Sides, she may beat us to it and someone's gotta be around to say hello!"

The two men watched the halo of light move towards the house, as Dock crossed the yard on unwilling feet. Then the sheriff turned abruptly to his pard, "What d'ye figger?"

Sam shook his head gloomily. "It warn't a fall, the hawss ain't bruised or scratched none. Mebbe, Sally was thrown."

Pat shook his head in silent dissent. "Ketch yoreself a fresh hawss," he said quietly, "and le's hit for the Gulch."

Rattlesnake Gulch was located southwest of the spread, in a semi-arid expanse that lay between the fertile bottom lands of the valley and the desolate Barrens. It was a region of barren benches and rock-encrusted hills, range so poor that the valley cowmen abandoned it to the coyotes. From time to time, wandering sodbusters and destitute nesters settled in this unwanted fringe, subsisted on

slow-elked beef that strayed off the range below, and finally drifted on to greener pastures.

EYES ALERT FOR sign of Sally, the two men jogged through the hills. The moon now rode high, flooding the bare slopes of the ridges that sloped down into the valley with cold writhing ravines and rock-ribbed canyons were steeped in black shadow, dark and quiet as tombs.

Slowly, the pair worked westward, the terrain steadily rising towards the Culebras. Herbiage died, gnarled cedar and twisted juniper threw fantastic shadows, the ponies' shod hooves rang on rock. Like a human in mortal anguish, a panther screamed high among the crags.

Finally, the two silent horsemen breasted a long low hogback, bristled with outcropping rock and powdered with grey-white alkali. Ahead, stretched a flat saucerlike valley, clothed with stunted mesquite. Black-shadowed, a forbiding cliff wall bounded the valley to the north. Midway, the rocky ramparts were cleft by a great V. The riders dropped down into the valley, angling off towards the break in the cliff face. As they drew closer, the gap widened, the eroding walls drew back to reveal the entrance to a narrow gulch, choked with chaparral. The ponies dropped to a walk, following a narrow trail that wound through the brush.

The continuous splash-splash-splash of falling water upon rock floated through the dark—the key to existence in Rattlesnake Gulck.

A dog burst into frenzied barking in the shrouded gloom ahead. The brush thinned and a tumble-down shack, built by some long-gone desert rat, was outlined against the moonlit cliff side.

"Hello the house!" yelled Pat.

The two sat their ponies, waiting, while the dog, chained to the wheel of a decrepit wagon, awoke the echoes with snarling protest.

Again Pat hailed. The door slowly eased open and a woman's head, greying hair streaming around her shoulders, thrust out.

"Baldy around?" asked Pat, kneeing his mount closer.

"Sheriff Stevens!" The woman's breath escaped with a pentup sigh of relief. She threw the door open wide—a frail, pinch-featured creature, shabby wrap thrown over her nightgown. "My husband's in town, hunting a job."

"And plumb scared he'll find it," growled Sam.

"My wife been here?"

"Why yes, sheriff. She toted up a load of chuck this morning—the angel!" Mrs. Benton breathed the concluding words softly, like a benediction.

"When did she pull out?"

"At noon—is anything wrong?"

"She's lost!" said Pat tensely. He wheeled his pony, checked it. "Anyone else been around, ma'am?"

"Not a soul, no-one ever comes here, except Sally Stevens. And now—oh, sheriff, what can I do?"

"Nothing, ma'am," Pat set spurs to his mount, and cantered down the guch, Sam tailing him.

"What's the next move, Pat?" Sam pulled alongside. "Raise a posse and comb the hills?"

Brow knitted, Pat shook his head. "Every jasper in Dutch Springs who kin stradle a hawss is out on the range, fighting blackleg. We gotta go this alone. You hit Ezra's trail and git him up tuh the ranch. He kin out-injun an Indian when it comes to reading sign. Then you beat it and grab some shuteye."

IT WAS DAWN when Pat, uneasily dozing in a rocker, heard the steady drub of a fast-moving pony on the valley trail. Fully clothed, eyes heavy and chin black with beard, he strode to the door.

Ezra, hatless, red hair in tangled disorder, slid off his sweated pony and approached with long strides. His features.

"What's this about Sally?" he roared. "Sam claims she was thrown,

the doggoned liar. That gal sticks t' leather like a burr."

In swift, toneless sentences, Pat told of Sally's disappearance.

The red-headed giant ran a massive paw through his tangled locks. "Wal," he rumbled, "I gamble thet flea-infested sorrel bolted, never did see a sorrel worth a damn, they ain't got bottom. You ready tuh fork leather?"

Pat nodded and stepped back into the house. He tiptoed along the passage to Dock's bedroom, and softly pushed open the door. The boy was sound asleep, grimy cheeks smudgd with dried tears. Eyes moist, the sheriff noiselessly closed the door and pussy-footed away.

In the kitchen he scribbled a note and left it on the table:

You're foreman of the ranch, Dock. Feed and water the horses and stick around. Mebbe I'll be needing you.

Dad.

P.S. Mother will be home soon.

"Where'll we start in?" asked Pat, as once again he headed his pony westward. Always he was acknowledged leader of the trio, except where trailing was concerned. There Ezra was undisputed master.

"Benton's," boomed the ungainly redhead. "Ain't thet whar she hit the trail?"

"It's poor trailin', most rock, too hard f'r sign."

"And what sign the gal left you two wall-eyed mules rode over," grumbled Ez.

Pat, usually quick to respond to his pard's raillery, remained silent. Ez swung round in the saddle and his good eye focused upon his companion's stony features. The big man kneed his dun close and rested a huge paw on the stricken sheriff's shoulder. His voice lowered to a husky whisper. "F'r Gawd's sake snap out of it, Pat," he pleaded. "Sally's all right, she jest got tangled up in the hills. Betcher a tenspot we flush her afore sundown."

With an effort, Pat forced a smile. "Sure hope you're right, Ez, but Sally"—he swallowed—"wal, I guess Sally's jest a part of me."

The dun threw a shoe and they hit Rattlesnake Gulch in the torrid heat of midday.

Ezra loosened cinches and watered the horses, while Pat again questioned Mrs. Benton. The lonely nester's wife could tell him little. Sally had left shortly before noon in order to reach the ranch before sundown. She was in the best of spirits and promised to return on the following Friday with some blankets for the sick child.

BENT LOW IN the saddle, his one good eye squinting fiercely at the hoof-marked trail, Ezra led the way at a walk down the gulch. The earth was soft and for awhile the red-head moved forward confidently. Out on the flat sandy valley, too, the half obliterated hoof marks of Sally's pony were plain even to the sheriff, no slouch at trailing himself. It was in the canyons, however, where the ponies' shoes clanked on rock, and where the trail wound across sun-dried, hard-baked benches, that the uncouth giant's uncanny skill as a tracker became evident. Again and again he checked his pony, dropped to the ground and circled, peering around, scanning the greyish hardpan and nosing the scant herbiage like a great hound.

Hours fled and the burning ball of of the sun dropped towards the Culebras, but time was forgotten by these two plodding, searching men, laboriously tracing the homeward trail of the missing woman.

The peaks were red-rimmed and grey shadows crept over the chaos of canyons when Ezra, eye glued to the ground and leading his pony, suddenly threw up his arm and waved Pat back.

The sheriff reined up, eased a leg over the saddlehorn and mechanically rolled a cigarette while the shaggy Ezra quartered the ground. They had arrived at the intersection of two canyons. A seepage from some underground strata had brought moisture

to the surface and the uneven ground was clothed with coarse grass. A solitary willow, dwarfed and twisted, struggled for life under the smooth-polished canyon wall.

Pat's interest quickened as the questing Ezra lingered, working slowly over the trampled grass, sinking at times to hands and knees. At length, he straightened and lumbered towards the eager-eyed sheriff.

"Wal?" Pat's voice was hoarse.

Ezra pulled up a pace from the rider, gazed at the sheriff uncertainly and ruffled his red hair in perplexity.

"Spill it!" rasped Pat.

"You ain't agoin' t' believe this, Pat," rumbled Ezra, "It sure beats all creation. Some dang-blasted sidewinders done grabbed Sally and rode away with the gal. Three jaspers cantered outa that there canyon, with a lead hawss. The off-front shoe of one was chipped. They yanked the gal outta the saddle, set her on the spare hawss and hit west." He gazed reminiscently at the bent grass, "She done fought like a wildcat."

"But who in hell would kidnap Sally?" Pat's voice was strained, incredulous.

Ezra's shoulders rose in a gesture of helplesness.

"You plumb certain?"

The red-haired gestured eloquently towards the trampled grass. "You kin stake yore saddle on it—the sign's right there."

6

"WAL. WHAT are we waitin' for?" The Sheriff's voice was harsh. "Let's hit the trail of the buzzards!"

Ezra nodded mutely towards the west. Already the gaunt peaks of the canyon was greying. The barren hogbacks that hemmed them in were dissolving and blending with the creeping curtain of oncoming night.

"Cain't read sign afore sun-up, you know thet, Pat," he returned patiently. "Reckon we'll stick around." He led his pony towards the solitary willow, loosened the cinches, stripped off saddle and bridle, and hobbled the animal with a buckled strap.

Reluctantly, the sheriff slid out of leather. Impulse urged him to press forward relentlessly on the kidnap trail. Reason told him Ezra was right; it would be fools' play. No man could follow sparse sign in the fast fading light. By pressing forward they would likely lose the trail completely. Hunting blindly, they would have no more chance of running the kidnappers to earth than they would of finding a pin on the prairie.

Ezra hunkered by the fire and passively puffed at a quirley. As the darkness deepened, the sheriff sank down beside him, gazing stony-eyed into the dancing flames.

"Dangblastit, Ezra!" he burst out finally, "this damned outrage got me tied in knots. I jest can't figger why they picked on Sally. It was planned, else why the lead hawss. Ef some hoss-thief or night rider took a shot at me, I'd savvy. Reckon a scad of them gents hate my guts. But Sally! She never harmed a fly. She mothered every deadbeat in the Valley. Why in the name of creation, pick on her?"

Ezra grunted sympathetically. "Ride easy, Pat. Ain't no use tuh git riled up. The yellow-gutted skunks darn't harm the gal. They ain't so locoed thet they figger we won't ketch up—sometime." Despite his confident words, the rough-hewn giant feared the worst.

Ezra glumly guessed that, lacking the sand to meet the redoubtable sheriff face to face, some former jail-birds, bitter wih fancied wrongs, had stabbed him through his good-hearted, unsuspecting wife. As his eye flicked over Pat's drawn features, he breathed a fervent prayer that they would find her alive. To expect her to be unharmed was too much.

The stars blinked out and the deep silence of the solitudes enveloped the canyons and shrouded the two men hunched over the dying embers.

Ezra rose, flicked away a cigarette

butt in a glowing curve and shook out his slicker. He rolled it around his body, and stretched out, feet to the fire.

PAT STARED unseeingly into the reddening ashes. His pard's vibrant snoring, gathering volume with every breath, disturbed his reverie and brought him back to reality. He jerked to his feet, every nerve taut. Sleep was not for him.

In the wan light he walked stiffly across the canyon, drawn towards the patch of trampled grass that told the story of the abduction. For awhile he stood staring at it fixedly, as though by mere effort of will he could conjure up the images of the wolves who had dealt him this mortal blow. A struggle, Ezra said. Yep, Sally was a thoroughbred. She would fight with tooth and nail as long as strength remained. Mebbe, in that mat of trampled grass there was something, some clew, that Ezra, skilled tracker that he was, had overlooked.

Driven by some deep intuition, the sheriff dropped to hands and knees, and commenced searching, searching, searching, for what he knew not.

Inch by inch, he worked through the grass, fingers feeling, digging, exploring; combing the rank stems, pawing the moist sand, fingering loose pebbles.

For an hour or more he grubbed with silent intensity, the mere physical action bringing a small mead of relief to his tight-strung nerves. Then, of a sudden, his fingers encountered metal, the links of tiny chain, crushed into the yielding earth by a heavy boot.

Triumphantly, he wiped off the clinging sand with his bandana, and squinted at his find in the gloom. It was a short length of watch chain, not four inches long, with slender, exquisitely chased links. The link at each end was broken.

With a sigh that was almost a snarl, the sheriff rose to his feet. Here then was the clew he was seeking. The finely wrought chain was distinctive, unique. Find the owner of the broken remnant and he had one of Sally's assailants.

Carefully, he stowed the precious fragment in a pants pocket, returned to the dead fire, lay down and dropped off into dreamless sleep.

AS THE SUN swung upwards, and its prickling rays gathered strength, the hours were a repetition of the day before.

Remorselessly, yard by yard, the dogged Ezra followed the trail of the four ponies. It led south and west, ever angling closer to the ramparts of the Culebras.

Noon found them out in the Barrens, a waterless maze of sun-swept canyons and rugged gulches that snaked through the rock-girded hills, and ultimately smashed in titanic confusion against the towering flanks of the mighty Culebras.

Of vegetation there was none, save the ubiquitous cholla, frosted and thousand-spined. No life was visible in this smeltering expanse except a solitary eagle, poised on motionless pinions, a mote against the blue.

Ezra's progress slowly dropped to a snail's pace. At last, he stopped, straightened and mopped his sweat-strained face, wrinkled in baffled disgust, with a red bandana.

" 'Sno use, Pat," he growled. "Cain't trail them hombres over bare rock, and this ain't nothin' but rock. Reckon they doubled, a pack rat u'd starve out there." He jerked his head toward the mad chaos of canyon and crag ahead, shimmering through waves of heated air.

Pat nodded. The sharpness of his grief had now blunted to a dull despair. Wordlessly, they swung their ponies around and headed eastward, their pace held down by Ezra's lame pony.

NIGHT AGAIN enveloped the Valley when they jogged into the ranch. Dock raced out of the house at sound of their ponies' hooves. "Hi dad, where's mom?" he yelled excitedly, as they dismounted.

The eagerness in the young voice

stung the wearied sheriff to the heart.

"Reckon she won't be along f'r awhile, son."

"She ain't—" the boy stopped, quick dread checking the question on his lips—"hurt?"

"Nope, jest gone away f'r a spell."

"She — didn't — say — goodbye?" Dock struggled manfully to keep his voice level."

Pat grasped his small hand. "Le's go into the house, son."

Sam sat in a rocker. His gimlet gaze flicked over the sheriff's trail-stained garb and leaded eyes, and he understood.

"You hit the hay, Dock." He chucked the troubled boy under the chin. "Roll out bright and early, then mebbe I'll loan yuh my saddle gun t' shoot coyotes, like I said."

"Let the boy stick around!" Pat's voice reflected his spirits. He was tired, physically and mentally. He dropped listlessly into a chair. "He'll wise up, sooner or later."

In lusterless tones he told of Ezra's discovery and their fruitles attempt to trail the desperados.

The crooked-nosed man swore, softly and succinctly, when Pat concluded. "Kin yuh beat it! Never know'd no-one, outside of 'Paches, tuh interfere with wimmen. They warn't 'Paches?"

"Hawses was shod," boomed Ezra, looming in the doorway.

"Mebbe they stole 'em," snapped Sam.

"Nope," said Pat decisively. "This warn't Injun work."

Sam regarded the sheriff intently, inquiry sparking his bright eyes. "What d'ye aim tuh do?"

"What d'ye think?" rasped Pat. "Hunt them sons 'til I drop."

The room was clothed in uneasy silence. Sam's insistent voice cut through it like a sharp knife.

"You gotta job tuh do in the Valley, Pat. You took an oath of office. Ef you pull out now, folks u'll say you quit cold when the goin' got tough. All hell's broke loose, it sure looks like ruination. Bank closed its door yesterday. There's gordamned skulduggery afoot. You jest gotta stick around."

"I'll go hunt for mom!" shrilled the boy.

"Lissen," continued Sam. "Me and Ezra kin handle this right well. I'll pervide the brains and Ezra kin tag along tuh do the chores. We'll camp on Sally's trail until Hell freezes."

"Lemme go too!" begged Dock, grabbing the squat man's left arm.

Sam's right eye descended as he met Pat's chill gaze. "Dammit, I fergot! I cain't quit my spread and leave Kitty and the baby alone. Ef I knew a man now," his sharp eyes appraised Dock, "who could fill my boots, a spry young feller like—" he hesitated.

The lad's brow wrinkled, his troubled grey eyes sought his father's stern face, then focused upon the expectant Sam.

"Kin I?"

The squat man expelled his breath with a trenchant sigh of relief. "Heck, you're the very man, Dock. You mosey over tuh my place at sun-up. Now beat it to bed."

"SO THE sign petered out!" Sam murmured as the door closed behind Dock. His demeanor was that of a conjuror who is about to produce a rabbit out of a hat.

"You said it!" growled Ezra. "The sons hit f'r the Barrens and vamoosed."

"And you never found one clue!" purred his partner.

His complacency irked the bull-like Ezra. The giant had spent the most of two days tediously following faint sign under a blazing sun, to lose his quarry in the end. He was in a belligerent mood.

"Nary a clue, you yapping coyote cub," he roared. "And whar was you—a polishin' the seat of yore pants on Pat's armchair!"

Sam grinned complacently. "Lissen tuh the big stiff, he couldn't track a wagon thru a bog-hole. Now I got something—cast yore peepers on thet!" Carefully, he pried a small square of cracked glass out of his

shirt pocket and laid it gingerly on the table. Sand still adhered to the upper side, which was coated with a dark substance.

The two men leaned forward and eyed the exhibit curiously.

"Wal," demanded Ezra, in disgust. "A bit of winder glass, so what?"

"Winder glass, hell!" snorted Sam. "It's a plate, lummox, a photographer's plate, they takes pictures on 'em. Feller musta pointed thet one at you, 'cos it's cracked." The squat rider never lost a chance to shoot a barb at Ezra's tough hide.

Interest quickened in Pat's tired eyes. He sensed Sam was working up to something—big.

"Whar d'ye stumble across it?" he inquired.

"In Rattlesnake Valley, not a mile from the Gulch," replied Sam triumphantly. "I was pokin' around up there on me lonesome when you birds was runnin' in circles around the Barrens. It caught a sun-flash and I dug it outa the sand."

"So Telford, thet bean-stalk photographer, was around the Gulch?" The sheriff was all attention now.

"Ain't no-one else takes photographs."

"And the skunk's been nosing all over the Valley like a stray burro. Say," Pat eyed his shrew-eyed partner hard. "You figger there's a tie-up between the blackleg and the kidnappin'?"

"Gawd knows!" Sam shook his head dubiously. "But whyfore would thet hairpin tote his black box back inter the hills, right atop Sally's fade-out? Ef you stick around, Pat, and lay the finger on the guys who's spreadin' blackleg, I'll gamble you git wind of Sally. Them tracks tuh the Barrens was a blind. They savvied Ezra would stick tuh the trail like a hound dawg—and with about as much sense." The squat rider flashed a challenging eye at Ezra, but the big man refused to take the bait. Ruffling his unruly mop of hair, he stood frowning at the incriminating square of glass.

"Reckon you hit th' bullseye!" There was a new note of confidence in the harried sheriff's voice. At last he had something he could sink his teeth into. "You boys comb the Barrens, I'll stick around the Valley. And right soon I aim tuh powwow with Mr. Peter Telford."

7

DUTCH SPRINGS had shore changed plenty in the few days he had been away, thought the sheriff grimly, as he jogged into town. All the little cowtown's devil-may-care jauntiness had fled. It was like riding into a morgue, wherein lay the stiffening corpse of Powder Valley prosperity.

The brick bank brooded over Main Street like an empty vault, its heavy plank doors padlocked. A notice, hastily scribbled and tacked to the entrance, stated that business was temporarily suspended, pending examination of assets, and expressed confidence that all deposits would ultimately be returned in full.

A pall of depression had descended upon the townfolk. They moved silently along the plankwalks, bunching close when they exchanged words. Their voices were low-pitched and somber. The shrill shout of a boy, too young to comprehend the calamity that had overwhelmed his elders, seemed as out of place as laughter in a funeral parlor.

The doors of the sprawling mercantile store were still open. Pat figured that Tod Gleeson, who had taken over after Ed Winter's untimely death, carried so many Powder Valley citizens on the cuff already that a few extra dollars wouldn't amount to a hill of beans. Folks had to eat, money or no money. Anyway, Tod was as good as bankrupt already, with cows dying like flies on the range.

The sheriff tied up outside The Jewel Hotel, loosened a gunnysack, which contained his personal belongings, from the saddle strings and stepped inside. Life alone at the ranch

would be unbearable; he had decided to take a room in the hotel for awhile.

Pat dumped his war sack at the showcase desk and signed the dog-eared register. "Shackleteeth" Simpson, the wizened old clerk, dropped a room key on the glass counter.

"Never seen sich times," gabbled the clerk, his false teeth clacking after each word. "Reckon Dutch Springs u'll fold up, like one of them ghost towns. Folks claim the Cattlemen's Bank won't pay more'n ten cents on the dollar, and them land sharks upstairs are grabbing good range f'r the price of peanuts. Look-at!" He inclined his greying head, rheumy eyes staring over the sheriff's shoulder.

Pat turned. Two spurred riders, dejection written plain on their weathered features, clumped heavily across the lobby.

"Howdy, Tom, Bill!" hailed the sheriff. The nearer raised a dispirited hand as they slowly climbed the stairs. Pat knew them as small ranchers, hard-working cowmen nearing middle age, with growing families—and heavy mortgages. Now they were compelled to sell for a song the little they had given the best years of their lives to accumulate.

"They drift in every day," clacked the old clerk. "Reckon Montgomery and Markham u'll throw the whole danged valley into one spread and call it the M & M." He cackled at his own joke.

Pat moved away from the garrulous room clerk and followed the cowmen upstairs. He unlocked the door of number 235, dumped his belongings on the bed and threw up the window. Then he plunged down on a wheezy chair and rolled a smoke. Powder Valley had sure taken it on the button.

Across the passageway, he heard Mortimer H. Markham's door open and close. Heavy footsteps of the two ranchers died away along the corridor. Well, he was due to have a few words with the fleshy Easterner and this time was as good as any.

IN RESPONSE to his sharp rap, Markham's high-pitched voice bade him enter.

Beside the window, the land buyer had rigged up a make-shift table from three planks, resting on trestles. Upon it was littered a miscellany of papers, a brown leather satchel, an open box of fat cigars, ink bottle and pens. Overflowing a straight-backed chair, Markham, in shirt sleeves, gripped a cold cigar between thick lips and sat at the table, busily making notes in a small memorandum book.

"What can I do for you, my good sir?" He flung the words carelessly over his shoulder, without turning his head.

"Tell me how tuh cure blackleg," returned the sheriff laconically.

Markham winced as though from an unexpected blow. His head swiveled swiftly. Pat could have sworn he read panic in those small, fat-embedded eyes. Then a mask dropped over the land buyer's fleshy face.

"I presume you are jesting, sir?"

"Never was so doggoned serious in my life." The sheriff crossed the room, lounged against the wall, thumbs hooked in his gun belt and stared down at the corpulent Markham.

"But, aw, this blackleg is a disease, is it not?" The land buyer spread his pudgy hands. "What would I know of cattle disease, I am a business man."

"Wouldn't it be good business tuh spread blackleg an bust land prices?"

Markham heaved to his feet, brow dark with anger. "I resent your scurrilous insinuations! Your badge does not privilege you to insult reputable business men, sir! I have impeccable credentials."

"Can the chatter!" cut in Pat curtly. "Answer my question!"

Markham champed on his cold cigar, eyes searching the sheriff's lean features. "Well, I admit this—er—epidemic has proven propitious, from

a buyer's viewpoint, but I regard such a visitation, sir," his voice became sonorous, "as purely an Act of God."

"You acquainted with thet photographer who rode the stage with you from Hopewell?"

"That uncouth person, peering through darkened glasses? I never saw the fellow in my life before."

Like a plump hen whose feathers have been ruffled, Markham sank on to his chair again, spat out the frayed remnant of his cigar and selected another from the box. The sparkling solitaires on his stubby fingers shook and scintillated as he fumbled in the box.

Was it guilty knowledge or an honest man's seething indignation that caused those quivering fingers, mused the watching sheriff?

"Who you buyin' for?" he queried bluntly.

"I have already informed you—a group of eastern capitalists. I assumed, sir, that far-seeing citizens, such as yourself would welcome the influx of new capital. Instead, you, ah, treat me, as a suspect, a criminal." The fat man was regaining composure now. He touched a match to his cigar and expelled a cloud of blue smoke.

Ain't scared no longer, thought Pat. Mebbe he figgered I packed a warrant. Cain't read his mind, dang it! Aloud, he said placatingly, "Wal, mebbe I was barkin' up the wrong tree, Mister Markham. Reckon we all got a bad case of jitters on account of the blackleg. I'll be seein' yuh!"

He straightened and swung towards the door.

"Hey!" Markham's voice was almost jovial. He pushed the cigar box across the table. "Help yourself to a handful of smokes, sheriff, excellent brand! No offense taken, I assure you. I can understand your perturbation, perfectly. Consider my diagnosis seriously. This blackleg, a perfectly natural outbreak, like measles or small-pox. Regrettable, but—" he extended his hands, palms up, eloquently, his voice became pious, "I regard it as an Act of God."

Pat gathered up a fistful of cigars and dropped them into his shirt pocket. "Sorry tuh trouble yuh!" He raised his arm in a gesture of farewell and stepped outside.

TREADING heavily, he crossed the corridor and slammed his room door behind him. Then, in a flash, he unstrapped and kicked off his spurs, eased the door noisely open and tiptoed across to Markham's door. Dropping on one knee, he applied his eye to the keyhole.

The land buyer was sagged in his seat like a stranded jellyfish feverishly dabbing his brow with a white handkerchief.

Back in his room, the sheriff pitched the cigars through the open window and thoughtfully rolled a cigarette. "So thet four-flushin' hog's playing both ends agenst the middle," he murmured. "Is he the brains or the front man? There's a gang workin' somewheres. Wonder ef he's in cahoots with the limey? Could be, thet jasper's nosin' all over creation. And has he dealt thet photographing stringbean a hand? I gotta brace Mister Peter Telford, pronto."

Eyes alert for sign of the gangling photographer, Pat drifted through town, dropping questions here and there, but the bony man with the dark glases had faded from sight. Mike, in the Gold Eagle, finally threw light on his disappearance.

"Sure, I saw Pete yesterday," he volunteered, wiping imaginary stains off the bar from force of habit. "He dropped in f'r a quick one. Said he was hittin' for Hopewell, figgered they mislaid some plates in the Express Office up there. Want yuhr picture taken?"

"You hit it," grunted Pat. "Tell him tuh drop in, and bring the picture box."

BACK IN his lean-to office, behind the Courthouse, he jackknifed into the old swivel chair with a grunt of satisfaction. At last a lit-

tle, no more than a feeble glimmer, was breaking on the blackleg mystery. Markham was involved—his collapse after his talk in his hotel room proved that. Concrete evidence was needed now. That, and discovery of his accomplices.

The door flew open and a tornado roared in. Bill Fraser, ramrod of The Lazy F, biggest spread in Powder Valley, was a short, heavy-muscled bundle of dynamite. His face was tanned as dark as weathered cowhide and balanced by a rocky, outjutting jaw. Sunk deep in their sockets, his eyes blazed like twin pieces of glowing lava. A gun sagged about his waist. The veins corded in his brawny forearm as he flung forward and pounded Pat's desk.

The sheriff leaned back and listened silently until there was a brief lull in the stream of expletives that crackled from the irate rancher's lips.

"I know you done lost a wad of steers," he broke in, consolingly, "reckon there ain't a spread got off scot-free. But what d'ye expect me tuh do—round up every stranger in Powder Valley, with no evidence and no warrants? Cain't be done, Bill!"

"Hell t' blazes! Yuhr goin' soft!" roared Fraser. "Who spoke of warrants? A rope's more t' my liking. String thet lime-juicer up!"

"F'r what?"

"Thet doggoned dude rode out and made an offer f'r my spread. I tole him t' go t' hell. Not two days passed afore I had blackleg. Evidence!" The grizzled cowman almost choked in his rage. "Ain't thet evidence?"

The sheriff slowly rocked to and fro in his chair, cool grey eyes regarding Fraser's distorted features. Inwardly, he sympathized with the old rancher, half-crazy from watching his prize shorthorns drop by the dozen, but he couldn't make arrests on supposition.

"Nope," he returned steadily. "It ain't good enough, Bill. We gotta get the lowdown afore we start filling the hoosegow."

"Gawdalmighty, Pat Stevens," yelled Fraser, "you gotta give us action. You cain't set here polishin' the seat of yore pants and watch thet side-winder clean up the range. Ef I sight the varmint, I'll plug him—surer 'n hell."

Through the open door Pat had a clear view of a short section of Main Street. Staring past the infuriated cowman, he watched two women cross the sun-flooded street, their voluminous skirts stirring the dust. Then he tautened as the Englishman's tweeded form lounged into view. Contentedly sucking his briar pipe, the limey swung blithely along the farther plankwalk.

The intensity of Pat's gaze drew Fraser's attention. The cowman swung around. His angry eyes focused upon the tweeded form. Too late, Pat jumped and grabbed at his thick-set form. With an inarticulate yell, he plunged for the door and headed for the street, head down, like an enraged bull. As he ran, his fingers closed upon the butt of the .45 bumping against his leather chaps.

Pat saw the Englishman pivot lazily when Fraser's challenging yell hit his ears. The amiable smile faded from his ruddy features and his blue eyes opened wide with amazement, as the enraged rancher plunged awkwardly across the street, dust swirling around his boots. Ten paces distant from the land buyer, Fraser dropped into a crouch. His unsuspecting quarry stared at him across the hitch-rail, a thin tendril of smoke coiling upward from his briar pipe. The cowman's gun came up and out. Pat panting behind in full pursuit, heard the hammer click back.

8

THE FRACAS was all over in ten seconds, although it seemed ten hours to the sheriff—a helpless spectator. Nothing but a slug would have stopped the enraged rancher, and Pat was not plugging

black cat scurried across the chopped up road and he saluted its fleeting shadow hilariously with outflung arm.

Tall and misshapen in the gloom, a shadowy form moved silently out of an alley ahead and flattened against a board fence. Unconscious of the man watching his progress, the Englishman strode along. As he came abreast, the stranger spoke his name.

The Englishman stopped humming. He checked in mid-stride and swung towards the speaker. A gangling form materialized from the shadows and stepped close. It was Telford, the photographer, minus the dark glasses.

"Well?" queried Montgomery sharply.

The photographer opened his mouth to speak, but as his lips moved, the darkness was split by a crimson flash. Montgomery heard the flat plunk of a bullet into flesh and whirled, even as the roar of the explosion thundered upon his ears.

With a faint groan, the photographer collapsed, clawing at his stomach. The Engishman drew his derringer and fired in the direction of the flash. Then, he dropped to the ground beside the squirming figure of the wounded man and peered into the darkness. Nothing stirred except the wounded man. Through the sudden stillness that followed the shots the mournful song of a drunk floated across the roof tops from Main Street, "Oh bu-ry me not on the l-one prairee, whar the wolves kin howl and growl o'er me."

"Damned appropriate!" muttered the Englishman.

9

A STRAY SHOT or two meant nothing to the citizens of Dutch Springs. Riddled signs along Main Street bore eloquent testimony to the markmanship of exuberant riders commemorating their visits to town. Further, every Westerner knew there was but one place to be when lead started flying—elsewhere.

It was not surprising, therefore, that Montgomery was left severely alone in the dim street, deserted save for himself and the disabled photographer writhing in the dust.

It chanced that Pat Stevens was passing the closed bank on the corner, heading for The Gold Eagle, when the two shots shattered the silence of the darkened street. He jerked to a standstill. Promiscuous shooting was not uncommon on Main Street, but this gunfire came from a respectable residential section, which event was unusual enough to merit investigation.

He headed into the dark canyon of B Street, pushing into the gloom with alert eyes and muscles tensed for quick action. Ahead, like a firefly, a match flared and died. Pat hitched his gun forward, in readiness for a fast draw, and eased forward over the ruts.

Another match sputtered into flame, not a dozen paces ahead. Before its faint glow waned, he recognized the Englishman, on his knees before a sprawled figure.

"You shore keep in practice!" he growled. "Who'd yuh plug, and why?"

The Englishman looked up at the figure looming above him, his features a white blur. "Kindly refrain from jumping to conclusions," he snapped. "This poor fellow has been seriously wounded by an assissin. He needs immediate medical attention."

"Doc Trimble's place ain't more'n two hops and a jump." Pat jerked his head towards two windows, glowing in the darkness. "Le's tote him over."

The two eased the groaning victim to his feet, locked hands and cradled him in a makeshift seat. Telford's long arms flopped around their necks. Stumbling on discarded tin cans and tripping over patches of squat brush, they headed towards the doctor's house.

A stolid Indian woman, two pigtails of glossy black hair hanging down her back, opened the door in response to Pat's hail. For the first

Bill Fraser to save a man he strongly suspected of guilt.

Fraser's gun arced down. Before it leveled, Montgomery's right hand snaked beneath his loose-hanging coat and whipped out, grasping a squat-barreled derringer.

Both guns roared almost as one, although Pat could have sworn the derringer, with its sharper bark, had the edge. A window tinkled into slivers behind the limey. Fraser's chunky body half-twisted from the impact of hurtling lead. His gun hand jerked up, the iron slipped from his twitching fingers and thudded into the dust. A soggy red stain spread fast over his grey shirt where it covered his right shoulder. He staggered, recovered his balance and desperately dabbed down for the gun with his left hand.

Pat, hurrying up from behind, booted the weapon out of reach. Fraser was swaying. The Sheriff grabbed him and held him upright. "Thet's aplenty, Bill!" he drawled.

"I'll git thet coyote yet," fumed the cowman, glaring at the tweeded figure. Montgomery's gun had vanished. He ducked beneath the hitch rail and advanced towards the bloodied, frothing rancher.

"Lemme at him!" gasped Fraser, oblivious of the blood that soaked his shirt and ran in scarlet rivulets down his hairy chest.

"Tom! Denny!" Pat named two men among the fringe of curious onlookers who had gathered around the little group. "Tote Bill up tuh Doc Trimble's office, he's bleedin' like a stuck pig."

The first deadening impact of the .41 slug from the Englishman's derringer was wearing off, and the cowman's features were twisted with pain. He slumped suddenly, and the two townsmen half led, half carried him down the street for the doctor's attention.

Pat turned to the limey. "Yore plenty fast with thet hideaway."

The other smiled. "Just as well, don't you think, sheriff?"

"I reckon you savvy why Bill went on the prod."

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Blackleg!" returned Pat laconically.

There was more annoyance than surprise in the Englishman's face when he replied, "You Westerners are a damnably suspicious crew."

"Mebbe we got good reason."

Montgomery's brows lifted at the challenge in the sheriff's soft tones.

"Fiddlesticks!" he snapped angrily and with a shrug turned away. Pat's voice halted him. "D'ye want tuh swing?"

"Indeed no! Are you, by any chance, threatening me?"

"Wall, git outta town when the gettin's good. The stage goes thru today."

Again the limey's blue eyes iced over and his voice became brittle. "And why should I leave this peaceful little metropolis?"

"'Cos the boys are considerable riled, and are liable tuh stage a neck-tie party."

"I am surprised our excellent sheriff and his aides would permit such indiscretions." Sarcasm tinged the Englishman's silky tones.

"Mister," replied Pat earnestly. "Mebbe you've seen a stampeding herd. Wal, it's got nothin' on a Powder Valley mob when the boys go on the rampage." With this parting shot, the sheriff turned on his heel and headed back for his office. The Englishman stuffed the bowl of his briar pipe, negligently sank on to the bench outside the barber's, which chanced to be behind him, and apparently pondered the sheriff's advice.

SEVERAL hours later, the Englishman stepped jauntily down the front steps of Mrs. Stanfield's boarding house. The street was dark and innocent of plankwalks. Picking his way around chuckholes by the faint starlight and the sparse illumination afforded by oil lamps that threw obling wedges of yellow light through the windows of wide spaced frame houses, he headed in the direction of Main Street.

In high spirits, Montgomery hummed a waltz tune as he progressed deviously down the street. A

time he saw the victim's features, illuminated by the flood of light from within the house.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" Pat ejaculated, "it's the photographer!"

"You come!" said the woman, glancing incuriously at Telford's sagging body and the glistening faces of the two panting men supporting his lanky form. She led the way into a room in the front of the house, which had been rudely equipped as a surgery, and turned up the wick of a lamp set on a scrubbed pine table. Struggling through the doorway, the two laid the wounded man on a small iron bed that stood in a corner, its mattress covered with a gleaming waterproof sheet.

A fat little man with thick spectacles and a bibulous nose bustled in, enveloped by an aroma of whisky. He picked up the lamp, crossed the bare plank floor and eyed the figure on the bed.

"Lead poisoning, as usual, I presume!' he commented querulously.

"I reckon so, doc," drawled Pat.

"Hold this!" The irascible medico thrust the lamp at Montgomery, selected a blade from a glistening array neatly arranged on the table and began carefully to cut away the bloody clothing from around the victim's waist. He whistled softly as the wound was revealed—a puckered bluish hole in the left side of the lean stomach, from which blood welled sluggishly.

"Well?" The Englishman's voice was taut.

"Perforation of the intestines, fatal in seventy-five per cent of cases," snapped the little doctor. "Step outside, gentlemen, please, and ask Tina to come in—best damned operative assistant in Colorado."

IN THE PASSAGEWAY, Pat shouted for the squaw and led the way into a comfortably furnished room. A whisky bottle and a half empty glass stood on a small circular table beside an armchair. Pelts of bear and mountain lion were spread on the polished floor. Several inviting rockers stood around, in one of which was heaped magazines and newspapers. Colorful Indian blankets were draped on the walls. Over an oak rolltop desk at one side of the room a diploma was framed.

"Doc's den," volunteered the sheriff, tilting the bottle. He swallowed and passed the bottle to the Englishman. "Wanna drink?"

"Do I!" responded Montgomery feelingly. He took a long pull, breathed deeply and had another. Setting the bottle down within easy reach, he sank into a rocker and thoughtfully stuffed the bowl of his pipe.

Pat stretched out in the Doctor's chair. "Suppose," he said pointedly, "you come clean."

"The policeman's mind, eternally suspicious!" Montgomery's voice was edged. "Look here, my good man, I had absolutely no hand in the shooting of that unfortunate. As a matter of fact, I was groping my way back to the hotel after a social call. I heard a shot and saw him fall. I fired at the flash and—that is all."

"It couldn't be he traded lead with yuh?" queried the sheriff equably. "Feller kin tangle his spurs in the dark."

"Positively not!" Montgomery dabbed beneath his tweed coat and jerked his derringer from its harness. "This gun is .41 caliber, most men out here carry .45's. I swear that man was hit by a .45."

"Wal, we'll see what the Doctor digs out," said Pat indifferently. "Acquainted with this jasper?"

"I've seen him around town, a photographer, is he not?"

"Not on speakin' terms?"

"Why should I be?"

"No reason at all." The sheriff's voice was unconcerned. "The fellow rode in on the same stage," he added, as an afterthought. "You didn't chew the cud none? Folks kinda run off at the mouth on a long stage trip."

"As far as my recollection goes, he was most reticent. A timid, inoffensive fellow, I would say."

"Yeah!" Pat's voice was bland. He dug into his coat pocket and came out with a derringer—identical to the weapon carried by Montgomery—

in the palm of his hand. "Snicked thet out of his shoulder holster, jest like yourn!"

The Englishman glanced at the blued steel of the wicked little gun carelessly, and reached a lazy hand for the whisky bottle. "A curious coincidence," he yawned.

The hour was late and both men were half dozing when the plump little doctor bustled in. He made a bee-line for the whisky bottle, eyed its diminished contents with a frown, filled the glass to the brim and tossed the contents down.

"Messy job!" he rapped out.

"Dig out the slug, doc?" inquired Pat.

Trimble dropped a flattened chunk of lead into the sheriff's outstretched hand. "H'm,' mused the sheriff, "forty-five!" he rose, "Kin I trade a few words with the jasper?"

The doctor shook his head in vigorous dissent. "You cannot. At the moment the man is unconscious. If he survives, which I doubt, it will be at least a week before he is physically fit for interrogation. And now, gentlemen, I wish to retire."

"I say, doctor!" The Englishman grinned self-consciously. "Hold me responsible for any expense in connection with the affair. I imagine the poor fellow's destitute, sort of stray dog, y'know, and I am—er—well blessed with this world's goods."

The doctor smiled graciously as he trickled out another drink. Powder Valley patients were usually long on service and short on funds. "I will render my account, sir, I am sure the patient will be very appreciative."

Montgomery lingered as the sheriff strode out of the room. He stepped close to the doctor as Pat's footsteps died. "Spare no expense, doctor, I want our poor friend to have the best of attention, you understand, the best!" He quietly slipped five gold eagles over the table's edge.

BACK IN the stuffy hotel room, Pat slowly pulled off his boots and considered the flow of events with creased brow. A dozen questions clamored for answers in his brain. If Markham was tied up with the blackleg epidemic, Telford, roaming at will over the Valley, would make a logical accomplice. But the Englishman and the photographer carried guns of identical pattern, which tied the limey in, too. Yet talk was that Markham and Montgomery were independent operators. If they were in cahoots, why boost prices by bidding one against the other? It might have been a coincidence that Montgomery and Telford carried identical guns, but it was surely more than mere coincidence that the Englishman should be present when the photographer was cut down.

The sheriff dropped a boot irritably. Somewhere, just beyond his groping, lay the truth and revelation of the blackleg mystery. Well, all he could do was plug along, hoping that sooner or later he would get a break. Then he thought of Sally, swept out of his life as completely as if a cyclone had picked her up and whirled her into space. With a groan that ascended from the depths of his soul, Pat kicked off his remaining boot and fumbled for the makin's.

Hours later he still hunched in the straight-back chair, frayed cigarette butts strewn on the threadbare carpet around him.

Sleep? How could a man sleep when his wife was dead or in the hands of renegade riff-raff and his friends and neighbors were facing beggary?

PAT CLEANED up his stack of flapjacks and 'lasses, downed a cup of black coffee and slipped off his stool in the "All-American" restaurant. He stepped out on to the plankwalk. The rising sun shadowed Main Street and the windows of the Cattlemen's Bank glinted in its rays like the open eyes of a dead man. Two townsmen approached deep in talk, threw quick glances at the sheriff's tall figure, and hurried past.

Pat crossed the street and headed for the post office. The Stage which brought Dutch Springs' mail thrice weekly had passed through the previous afternoon. The sheriff figured that "Pop" Gunter, the wheezy post-

master, should have sorted it by now —providing there had not been too many postcards to read.

At the wicket, another acquaintance grabbed his mail, nodded abruptly in reply to Pat's greeting and scurried away.

The sheriff frowned. "Looks like I'm right unpopular," he muttered.

With a fistful of papers and letters, Pat moved along the creaky plankwalk towards his office. Two familiar ponies, trail-stained, were tied to the rail outside the Courthouse. Pat's pulse quickened and his step hastened.

The deep boom of Ezra's voice reached his ears before he opened the office door. Pat chuckled as he pushed in—the two inseparables were bickering as usual.

"Pat!" appealed the burly red-head, as the sheriff dropped his mail on the desk. "Thet mangy little wart hog over yonder claims burros never die, they jest shrivel up and blow away. Ain't thet loco?"

"You ever set your peepers on a dead burro?" demanded Sam sharply. "No siree! No one ever did. There jest ain't sich an animal."

"F'r gosh sakes, quit buzzin' like a coupla bar flies," grunted Pat as he slid into the swivel chair. They read a question in his anxious eyes and fell suddenly silent. Ezra shifted his big feet uneasily. Sam's shrewd eyes slanted away.

Right then the sheriff knew the answer, knew too, that their pointless arguing was a screen to cover their embarrassment at breaking the bad news.

"So yuh hit a blind trail?" His voice was heavy with disappointment.

"Reckon so, Pat." Sam's belligerence was gone. "We rode the Barrens three days straight and never saw nuthin' but rattlesnakes. Come sun-up we'll hit the trail agin."

Pat shook his head. "Reckon them two legged rattlers have holed up. Their trail's cold. Ain't no chance of cuttin' it now."

"Mebbe we could hunt f'r sign in the Valley," rumbled Ez. "Sam plumb convinced Sally's fadeout ties in with the blackleg."

"You sweat the truth outta thet photographer?" interjected Sam.

"Never saw hide nor hair of the cuss 'till last night," confessed Pat.

"What did the varmint cough up?"

"A slug," returned the sheriff dryly. "Right now he's moseying around the Pearly Gates." He told of the bushwacking of Peter Telford.

Sam expelled his breath in a shrill whistle. "Now who in thunder plugged the jasper—thet limey?"

"Not unless he ditched the gun, and he's slick enough f'r thet. He packs a .41 and the sawbone's dug a .45 slug outta Telford."

"Some cowman mighta spotted him circulatin' among his steers, dogged him, tuh town and rubbed him out," hazarded Sam shrewdly.

Pat nodded. "Yore guess is as good as mine. I braced Markham, and thet bladder of lard was scared stiff. Something smells mighty like a skunk around Dutch Springs, but hell," Pat shrugged his shoulders, "A stink ain't evidence."

The three subsided into baffled silence. Ezra scowled fiercely at the fly-specked calendar with his one good eye. Sam rolled a smoke with exacting care. Pat turned to his desk and shuffled through his mail. There was nothing unusual. *The Pueblo Weekly Record*, a stock journal, several reward dodgers, a cheap envelope addressed in crude block letters to "Pat Stevens, Sheriff, Dutch Springs, Colorado."

Pat idly ran his forefinger under the flap of the envelope, extracted a folded sheet torn from a writing tablet and smoothed it out on the desk. His eyes ran over the penciled writing. He froze to attention. In rigid silence he read and re-read. Then swung around in the swivel chair and held the sheet towards Sam. "Lamp thet!" he said in a strained voice.

Sam eyed the letter. A startled oath left his lips. Ezra leaned over, growled like an angered bear as he grasped the import of the message conveyed by the scrawled block letters:

YORE WIFE IS IN DANVILLE
A Friend.

10

EAGER AT THE promise of action, Pat jumped to his feet, the anonymous letter in one hand, the envelope in the other. The letter was post-marked "Danville." Re-newed hope shone in the sheriff's grey eyes.

"What d'ye make of it?" he asked.

"My guess is thet a sorehead split away from thuh gang and hankers tuh kick the bucket over," declared Sam.

"He don't say whar," rumbled Ezra, rubbing his ear uncertainly. "We cain't tear a sizable burg like Danville apart."

"But we kin poke around plenty," flung back Pat. He clapped his Stetson on his head. "Le's hit leather. We kin make it afore noon."

The three jogged south out of town, following the stage road, which looped across the yellow prairie. As they rode, the sheriff tried to temper the flood of hope that surged through him with cold reasoning. Anonymous letters were no novelty, he had received dozens since taking office—as had every sheriff. An unsolved killing usually brought a deluge. But the majority were as worthless as the paper they were written upon, doing little more than provide an outlet for some misfit's jealousies and suspicions. Pad had a deep-rooted contempt for the type of mind that spawned them. Usually, a man who feared to sign his name had little of worth to impart. But there were exceptions. Occasionally some unknown had given him a straight tip. Like Sam said, the gang might have split and some sorehead was steering him right.

Danville was a mining town, squatting in the foot-hills north of Spanish Peaks, about twenty miles south-west of Dutch Springs. There were few ranches in the smoke-shrouded hills that surrounded the town, and miners clumped over the plankwalks. The town lay directly south of the scene of Sally's kidnapping and might well have been picked as a hideaway.

At Lone Tree, where a gaunt oak spread its gnarled limbs, green with lichen, over the deep-rutted road, a side trail angled westward. Far to the south, Spanish Peak, black and forbidding, tossed their rugged heads high against the blue. Stretched westward were the tawny ramparts of the Culebras. Midway between, a black column of smoke belched upwards from the maze of plateaus, hills and gulches, soiling the crystal-clear air—that was Danvile.

For an hour the three riders followed the wagon road that snaked through the parched hills. It was a thirsty, sun-seared land, patched with scrub oak and gashed with scarlet-tipped ocatillos, set in the dun earth like bloodied spears.

Then the stark ugliness of Danville burst upon their eyes—motley of tin-roofed shacks and yellowed adobes, clustering in the shadow of the great stamp mill, towering, like a high-walled fortress, from a barren bench, while its smoking chimneys befouled the serene sky.

The ponies clattered between the false wooden facades of the main street, where saloons, dance halls and lodging houses jostled like aging jades, grey and colorless, labeled with a medley of tawdry signs. The day shift was at work in the mill and the night shift sleeping, so the plankwalks were bare, save for a few loiterers.

Pat reined up before a tin shack, which bore a black-lettered sign, "Town Marshal." Doged by his two partners, he stepped inside the open door.

JIM MORLAND, the marshal, had worked with the sheriff before. Moreland, a great bull of a man with the bull's unreasoning tenacity and blind courage, grunted to his feet and extended a huge paw.

"Wal, Pat, ain't seen you in a coon's gea! Hear the blackleg struck you boys in the valley. Fresh meat's scarcer around here than ingots. Grab a chair and rest yore laigs, fellers!"

"Blackleg—and worse!" growled the sheriff, as the three distributed themselve around the ovenlike office. He told of his wife's disappearance and handed Moreland the anonymous letter.

"Jest whar did yuh figger on finding her?" inquired the marshal. "The town stinks with riff-raff and the honky-tonks are lousy with gals. Want we should comb the dance halls?"

Pat's mouth opened in angry remonstrance. Then, like a knife-stab, realization struck him that these were the spots a kidnapped woman might likelly be taken and confined.

His jaw closed, he gulped, then found speech. "Reckon we'll run thru the joints first. The wife's a prisoner. Sally's spunky, she'd raise Cain ef ever they loosed her."

"Jest as you say, Pat," agreed the burly marshal. He heaved to his feet, buckled his gun belt and pulled a Stetson over his close-cropped head. "Reckon we'll tackle The Purple Cow. Then we'll take Cleopatra's Parlor and the Yellow Snake."

Pat turned to Sam and Ezra. "You fellers mosey around the booze joints. Bartenders git tuh hear most everything. Git back in an hour and we'll chase up some chuck."

Together, the two lawmen worked down the length of Main Street. But not a clue did they uncover that might throw light on the fate of the yellow-haired Sally. Methodically, they checked the doss houses and tumbledown clapboard hotels, questioning clerks and boarding house keepers, without success. Finally, when the alloted hour had long since sped, they headed for the office again.

Sam and Ezra lounged in chairs tilted back against the wall and added to the litter of cigarette butts on the floor. They eyed the sheriff expectantly, but a glance at his glum features was enough.

"You boys strike anything?" His flat voice reflected sagging spirits.

"Nope," returned Sam somberly. "Ain't a yeller-topped woman in town that ever gits within gunshot of a saloon. Looks like some son run a blazer over us, Pat."

The sheriff shook his head in impatient dissent, strode to the doorway and stared hard-eyed at the conglomeration of shacks, squat adobes and unpainted frame structures that cluttered the gulch. "Hell!" he ground out bitterly. "They's a hundred holes whar the coyotes could go tuh earth."

Moreland's heavy hand rested on the distracted sheriff's shoulder. "Keep a stiff upper lip, Pat. I ain't got started yet. They's ways and means of ferritin' things out, but it takes time. You hit f'r home. Ef yore woman's in town, I'll know—within the week. And I'll send word, pronto."

The sheriff nodded in dreary acquiescence. Sam and Ezra followed him out upon the plankwalk.

DEFLECTED FROM the rock-bound flanks of the hills that ringed the town, the heat beat down upon the wooden awnings and slanted up from the street as though from an open furnace door. Ezra jerked his red thatch towards the cool dimness of a saloon across the way. "Le's licker," he rumbled, "afore we shrivel up and blow away, like Sam's doggoned burros."

They pushed through the batwings. The long bar was deserted save for a solitary grey-shirted rider lingering over a bottle. A battered Stetson sloped over his eyes and his shabby moleskin pants were tucked into scuffed riding boots. A gun hung low on his left side.

From long habit, Pat summoned the stranger up in the long mirror back of the bar. "Tough as a lava knob," the sheriff registered mentally, as his practiced gaze ran over the bleak eyes, hawk-like nose, and the bitterness deep-etched around the stranger's mouth. Southpaw, too.

Casually, the rider glanced up and met the sheriff's intent scrutiny. Pat saw the shock of surprise, then—as though a curtain had been drawn aside—a swift, wolfish blaze of hatred. In an instant, the fire was muted, smothered again by the curtain of

guarded caution, and the sheriff stared into black, incurious wells of indifference.

For a moment Pat was convinced that his imagination had played him a trick. Brow creased, he took his drink, groping deep in his memory in an endeavor to place that hawkish face.

The stranger emptied the glass, flung a dollar on the bar with his left hand. Then he adroitly rolled a smoke with the same hand, stuck it between his lips. Missing nothing, Pat searched his mind for recollections of left-handed men.

The object of his attention drifted towards the batwings. Pat glimpsed his right hand—thumb and two fingers missing.

As the dry hinges of the swinging doors squealed behind the stranger, memory clicked—Jules Beck, eight year stretch in the state pen, bank robbery with violence. Fast on the draw but not fast enough. Pat's slug had smashed into his gun hand as he thumbed the hammer. He'd never throw down with that right hand again.

So Beck remembered! Wal, a feller couldn't blame the hombre for feeling sore, eight years was a heck of a spell to be penned up like a mad dog. And the odds were he'd never throw a fast gun again.

Pat and Sam moved towards the street. Ezra lingered to slip an extra three-fingers down for luck. The bulky redhead could soak up more liquor than a sponge and still remain reasonably sober. Crossing the sawdust with long strides, he joined his companions in the searing heat of the street.

Ezra ducked under the hitch rail, half straightened, then dropped on hands and knees, nosing the trampled ground.

"Lookat the big hawg!" snapped Sam in disgust. "Drunk as a biled owl!" Hands on hips, he watched the redhead, who was busily routing through the dust.

"Git up on yore hind laigs," he cracked, "and fall over the saddle. Mebbe we kin rope yore useless carcase tuh the horn."

"Pat!" Ignoring the sallies of his squat partner, Ezra barked the word over his shoulder.

Sam's mouth closed with a snap at the urgency in the redhead's voice. The sheriff ducked under his pony's head and stepped quickly forward.

"Lookat thet!" bellowed Ez, indicating a half-obliterated hoof-print with a dusty finger. He wormed ahead on all fours and pointed to another. "Chipped shoe, off fore laig," he flung back. "All same Rattlesnake Gulch."

In a trice, the sheriff was sprawled on the road beside him. "B'gawd!" he croaked, hoarse with excitement, "it's the same hawss, the critter we tracked in the Barrens."

Dust-smothered, he scrambled to his feet, brow knitted. "Thet's Beck's pony," he rasped. "He tied right here."

"Who in hell's Beck?" demanded the bewildered Sam.

"Thet southpaw in the saloon. Say boys!" Pat's eyes gleamed. "The trail's hot!" He swung towards Ezra, who stood frowning at the hoof-pocked street. "Kin we dog thet pony?"

The redhead bent forward, walked out into the street, searching the ground. A buckboard rattled past, behind a pair of restive broncs, and he jumped clear of the wheels. Further down, a string of huge ore wagons rumbled ponderously into view, creaking behind strings of plodding mules. Horsemen cantered up and down the street, stirring the stinging dust.

Ezra wagged his head in slow negation. "Cain't be done, Pat, the sign's most all rubbed out. I kin say the jasper rode north. Reckon thet's all."

"Stick around!" flung Pat, and hot-footed towards the marshal's office.

"HARD-FEATURED jasper with thumb and two fingers of his gunhand missin'," ruminated Moreland, rasping his chin. "Wouldn't be Lefty Linyard?"

"When I winged the son he was Jules Beck. He likely switched monikers. You know this Linyard?"

"Shore. Hangs out in a shanty north of town. Hits f'r the hills once in a while, huntin' color. Never made no trouble. So he's a con?"

"Safe blower and gunman, cold-blooded as a rattlesnake." The sheriff's voice was edged.

"How kin we locate his hang-out?"

"Hit the wagon road north. Two miles out watch f'r a clump of pinon. They's a draw on the far side. Lefty's shack is up the draw. He don't crave company. Want I should mosey along?"

"Nope!" grunted Pat. "Three's plenty. Be seein' yuh!"

Tensed with repressed excitement, the trio headed northward out of town. For half a mile, shanties fringed the wagon road, then the desolate hills pinched in and the parallel tracks wound through a steep-walled canyon.

Sam, sharp eyes questing ahead, gave a shout and pointed. Up the canyon, to the right, the seamed wall crumbled and broke. At its foot, a stand of pinon clustered thick. Pat spurred to a canter, a gallop. The hooves of his partners' ponies thudded behind. Rounding the straight-limbed trees, he faced a shallow draw, thick with chaparral. A faint trail disappeared into the brush.

Ezra slid out of leather, searched the hoof-chopped ground and grunted with satisfaction. "The coyote's right ahead."

In single file, they walked their ponies up the trail, Pat leading, to quickly emerge into a small clearing. A small clapboard shack with tin roof stood in its center. Saddled and bridled, a pony was hitched to a post, close by the open door.

Pat fired swift orders. "Hit f'r the rear of the dump, Ezra. Sam, you cover me."

Ezra kneed his pony and streaked past the shack. Pat headed for the open door, while Sam slipped his Winchester out of the saddle boot and levered the bolt.

The pounding hooves of Ezra's pony brought Beck to the door, a rifle in his hands.

Pat threw down with his .45. "Drop thet gun!" he ordered curtly.

With a snarl, the ex-convict allowed the weapon to slip through his fingers. The butt hit the ground, while he retained his grip on the barrel.

"Remember me?" inquired the sheriff grimly, swinging out of leather. Beck's fingers tightened on the gun barrel, relaxed as he glimpsed Sam's leveled rifle in the background.

"Kin I fergit, damn yore soul!" he grated, holding up his disfigured hand.

"Whar's my wife?" cut in Pat coldly.

"How in hell would I know?" returned Beck sullenly.

"Lemme in!" The sheriff shouldered past the glowering ex-convict. "Keep the drop on the sidewinder, Sam!" he shouted, and disappeared inside the cabin.

11

THE SHERIFF'S pulse pounded as he stepped into the dim obscurity of the shanty. Was he to confront his missing wife at last, or would this prove to be another blind trail?

A few moments' swift search smashed his hopes. The earth-floored room that comprised the shanty yielded no sign of Sally. In one corner lay a disordered bedroll. A rude table and two chairs stood in the center. A hog's back stove was at one end, shelves behind it laden with cans and cooking utensils. Oddments of saddlery, a miner's pick, articles of clothing, were strewn around. A gunny sack, overturned, spilled rock fragments, doubtless hewn from some "glory hole."

The sheriff fished a vest from the heap of discarded clothing and fingered the pockets. If he could only find a few links of a broken watch chain! The vest yielded nothing, as did the coat and pair of pants.

Looked like Jim Moreland was right—mebbe Beck was no more than a harmless prospector. Yet there was

the chipped horseshoe!

Pat returned to the doorway, where the ex-convict fumed under the threat of Sam's leveled Winchester.

"Reach!" he orderd curtly.

"I served my stretch," rasped Beck. "Yuh cain't bust in an' rough me up! Whar's yuhr warrant?"

"Hobble yore lip," growled the sheriff. "Hist 'em!" The muzzle of his six-gun nudged the bitter-faced man's belt.

Beck glared defiantly into Pat's stony grey eyes and read something there that sent his arms skyward. Methodically, the sheriff searched him, slid a knife out of a shoulder sheath and pitched it aside, thrust the ex-convict's gun beneath his own waistband. But nothing incriminating came to light.

Pat leaned back against the door frame. Beck dropped his arms with a snarl of disgust and swung away. He checked at the sheriff's harsh command, "Freeze, you son!" The order was backed by a pointing gun. "Beck!" Pat's voice was smooth, menacing. "I've a mind tuh gut-shoot you f'r a lousy rattlesnake."

"F'r why?" Sudden fear sparked in the ex-convict's deep-set eyes.

"F'r kidnapping my wife, you mangy sheep-herder."

"Ain't never seen yore wife."

"Yore pony was around Rattlesnake Gulch the day she was snatched. We trailed yuh tuh the Barrens. Whar is she?" The hammer of the six-gun clicked back.

Sweat beaded on Beck's swarthy brow. "Hold it, Stevens!" he croaked. "I traded my buckskin f'r thet calico not a week back. Feller give me twenty cartwheels tuh boot."

"You ain't lyin'?" Pat's voice was soft.

"B-Gawd, thet's straight! I met up with some hombre in the hills 'way south, straddlin' thet calico. The hawss was jiggered and he was mighty anxious tuh punch the breeze. Reckon he was two jumps ahead of a posse."

"And you boosted him along?"

"I shore did," returned Beck defiantly. "Never had no use f'r lawmen."

Pat lowered the hammer and turned away, weighed with disappointment. He did not glimpse the vindictive triumph that gleamed in the ex-convict's eyes.

"Spool yore roll," he flung over his shoulder.

"Why for—" began Beck, in angry exasperation.

"Yore riding—tuh Dutch Springs."

Ignoring the ex-convict's muttered expletives, he swung into leather.

DAYLIGHT was dying and the plankwalks of Danville echoed to the tread of heavy boots when the four rode into town. Like ants, a black stream of men—the day shift—poured out of the gates of the great stamp mill and spread over the hillside, heading for the saloons and lodging houses in the town below.

Faces pallid comparison with the bronzed features of those who rode the range, the begrimed, visor miners crowded into saloons. Pianos tinkled, flares illumined the unlovely fronts of joints and garrish gambling halls. Above it all the mountain crests reared, calm and eternal.

Without drawing rein, Pat led the was eastward, out of the clamor into the serene, silent hills. Baleful eyed, the prisoner swung in the saddle beside him.

The sheriff was perplexed. Beck's story seemed straight and the contents of his cabin tied in with Town Marshal Moreland's account of his activities, but Pat couldn't forget the chipped shoe. Beck's alibi was pat—too pat. The calico pony provided the first concrete link with Sally's kidnapping that they had uncovered, and Pat had no notion of allowing the ex-convict to slip through his fingers until his innocence was proven—by capture of a man forking a buckskin.

The setting sun painted Spanish Peaks with scarlet. Grey pools of shadow slowly filled canyons and gulches, and spilled over the barren ridges. There was no sound save the monotonous clip-clop of the pony's

hooves on the hard-baked ground and the faint jingle of bit chains.

Beck's harsh voice broke a long silence. "Yuh cain't do this tuh me, Stevens. Whar's yuhr warrant?"

"I'll swear a warrant out, hombre—pronto."

"F'r hawss theft?"

"Nope, murder."

"Aw, yore loco! I know my rights. I wanna lawyer when we hit town."

"Ef you don't lock thet trap," the sheriff's voice as flinty, "you won't reach town."

DUTCH SPRINGS was deserted when they jogged down shadowed Main Street.

"'Pears blackleg struck the town, too," snapped Sam, peering to right and left with puzzled brow.

"Mebbe they all dried up and blow'd away," growled Ez.

"Sheriff! Sheriff!" Charged with terror, the shrill cry hacked through the brooding silence. Brown hair streaming in disarray, a girl dashed out into the street, almost under the forefeet of Pat's pony. He jerked to a stop and peered down into the distracted features of Phyllis Hampton. The confident, controlled school teacher was transformed into a terror-stricken human, whose eyes were distended with fear and whose voice quivered with emotion.

"Quick!" she panted, grasping the pony's mane for support. "They're hanging—hanging—" Her voice faded. She clung to the pony, staring up with wild, fearful eyes.

The sheriff slipped to the ground and placed an arm around the semi-hysterical girl. "Take it easy, ma'am," he counseled kindly. "Now, who's hangin'?"

"The mob—they're hanging Mr. Montgomery and Mr. Markham—in the picnic grove—south of town." With a deep sigh, the girl collapsed and slumped against the sheriff, a helpless, shaking figure.

Understanding flashed to Pat's mind—the elusive townsmen, the man who scurried away from the post office wicket. This lynching had been hatched for days, the whole town was in on it and the Lord only knew how many ranchers. From past experience, Pat was only too well acquainted with the volcanic passions that simmered beneath the easy, good-natured exteriors of Powder Valley citizens. He had feared an outburst, some outlet for the pent-up anger of those who had lost their all in the bank closing or had been wiped out by backleg on the range. At the worst he expected looting of the bank or smashing of store windows, but nothing like this.

"Sam," he barked. "Tote the school marm inter the office. Ezra, you jug Beck." Swinging into leather, he wheeled the claybank, drove home the steel and streaked south.

HALF A mile beyond the edge of town was a sheltered draw, clothed with scrub oak. Rock fireplaces and rough benches were scattered beneath the trees. It was a picnic spot for townspeople and an overnight camp ground for ranchers visiting town with their families, who for motives of economy preferred the open air, or who disliked the stuffy bedrooms of the Jewel Hotel.

Before Pat's madly galloping pony had covered half the distance, he sighted flaring torches moving among the trees like giant fireflies and heard the deep, menacing roar of a blood-hungry mob.

Then he swirled into the draw and yanked his hard-breathing mount to a sliding stop to avoid charging into the dark, indistinct mass of men gathered beneath the oaks. A dozen hands grabbed at the bridle. As the sheriff swung out of leather, he was surrounded by gesticulating, yammering men.

"What's doing?" he demanded, impatiently shaking free of restraining hands.

"You keep outa this, Pat Stevens," yelled a voice, cracked with passion. "We're hangin' them blackleg sons up tuh dry."

"You damned lunkheads, who appointed you judge and jury? Loose 'em!" Battering a path through the surging throng with fists and elbows, he lunged forward.

But one man in a maddened mob is as helpless as a chip on the surface of a raging torrent. Gripping hands stretched from the darkness and fastened on Pat's arms, shoulders, body. Overborne by sheer weight of numbers, he was wedged in and held tight, helplessly jammed in the crowd.

Over the heads of the mob, he glimpsed the two land buyers, their faces lighted by a dozen flaming torches held by men around them. The pair stood side by side on a rough picnic bench. A rope was looped around the neck of each and thrown over the thick branch of an oak overhead. Montgomery's tweed coat hung in shreds from his shoulders. He was hatless, his hair disheveled. Blood flowed from a gash in his forehead. His ruddy face was drawn and grimset. His lips made a tight line, and his blue eyes sparked defiance.

The corpulent Markham was an even worse case. His broadcloth coat had been torn off. One white shirt sleeve hung by a shred, the other had been wrenched away, revealing the length of his white, fleshy arm. Shirt and vest gaped open, uncovering glistening rolls of fat. Dark hair flopped down over his forehead. A scarlet stream seeped from his smashed nose and smeared mouth and chin. His eyes were fixed, staring ahead, as though he were in a trance.

Pat singled out men around the prisoners and yelled with all the force of his lungs, "Hey! Landley, Johnson, French, Brown, Henderson! You loco! You'll swing f'r this! Git a holt on yoreselves!"

Right arm strapped across his brawny chest, Bill Fraser jumped up on the bench beside the two victims.

"Keep outta this, Pat Stevens!" he roared in a bull voice. "I'm runnin' this show. These buzzards are agoin' tuh swing."

A roar greeted his words. Pat's voice was drowned in the pandemonium. Frenzied men yowled, shouted, even screamed. The torchlight flickered on a sea of rage-contorted faces, waving arms and brandished fists. These men were no longer husbands, fathers, law-abiding citizens, but raging beasts, bloodthirsty and unreasoning, as elemental as gibbering apes.

A NEATLY DRESSED man, with suave smiling features and close trimmed black beard, struggled free of the crowd and jumped briskly up upon the bench beside Fraser. Pat saw his lips move in quick urgent speech to the rocky-faced rancher. The latter apparently dissented, then shrugged his heavy shoulders and stepped down.

Justus Sharman, the newly arrived lawyer, held up a slim white hand for silence. For a while he was ignored. Then the uproar slowly quieted, like the dying thunder of a great wave that has spent its force against the rocks. Sharman commenced to speak, his voice clearcut and carrying, but again the hubbub broke out, drowning his words in a torrent of sound. Patiently, he waited, with a confident smile, while the mob hurled threats, shouts, catcalls...the voice of a wolf pack, frenzied at sight of its prey. The sheriff paid unspoken tribute to the lawyer's courage. Again, the turmoil subsided, slowly, reluctantly. Died into uneasy quiet. Sharman's voice, cool and clear, stabbed through the night:

"Fellow Americans! You believe in justice, so do I. A plague has visited this valley. Ruin faces us all. If these men are guilty of spreading this plague they should hang." A mighty roar drowned his words. Again he waited, smiling, continued when the outcry abated. "But let us give these men fair trial. Then, if their guilt is proven, they will be punished. Let us—" But a hundred impatient voices yelled him down. In vain, he stood with uplifted arms, appealing, remonstrating, his voice lost in the raging vortex of sound. Finally, raising his hands high over his head with a gesture of helplessness, he jumped down and was lost in the surging mob.

Bill Fraser's bull voice checked the uproar. "Like Sharman sez, we'll deliver their carcases tuh Pat Stevens. Ef they won't!" He thrust his good arm towards the dangling ropes.

Eager silence settled on the crowd as he turned to the Englishman.

"Did yuh spread blackleg?"

"I did not!" rang out Montgomery's voice.

"Know who did?"

"No!"

"You swing!" barked Fraser.

"Go to hell, you yellow coward!" The limey's voice was coldly contemptuous. He raised his voice high. "Has anyone a drink? Last request of the condemned!" His lips quirked with grim humor.

"Hyah y'are!" A bottle passed from hand to hand above the heads of the tight--packed throng. The Englishman grabbed it, took a long pull, then pitched it disgustedly back at the crowd. "Filthy stuff!" he ejaculated.

Fraser turned to the shaking bulk of Markham.

"You agoin' tuh talk?"

The fat man appeared to be in a stupor. The rancher grabbed his shoulder and shook him roughly. His tripple chins quivered. He licked his bloodied lips and gazed around fearfully.

"Will I get a fair trial?" His voice was a strained squeak.

"Ef yuh confess," bellowed the rancher.

"I'll—I'll confess," faltered Markham. "I—we—" From the dark beyond the trees a rifle cracked. The corpulent land buyer blinked like a wondering child, then clawed at his chest. His knees buckled. Big body suspended from the noose taut around his neck, he dangled helplessly—a mass of inanimate flesh.

12

SIGHT OF Markham's ponderous figure swinging slowly to and fro on the straining rope spread consternation through the mob that, a few minutes before, had been clamoring for his death.

Men gazed half-fearfully over their shoulders into the darkness. Some of the hardier spirits fanned out and commenced to clamber up the slope north of the draw from whence the bullet had sped.

Fraser yanked out a pocket knife and sawed at the taut rope from which the body was suspended. Pat elbowed his way to the front with ease—the madness had burned out of the jostling throng now.

The sheriff picked up Fraser's knife, lying on the bench, and cut the rope that was still looped around the Englishman's neck, compelling him to hold his head high to relieve the strain. As it loosened and fell away, the prisoner rubbed his galled neck tenderly. "That's one necktie I hope I'll never wear again," he commented wryly.

But Pat's attention was on the portly figure of Markham, flopped on the ground. Men bunched around, eyeing the still figure curiously. The flaming torches played on their bronzed, intent faces. Fraser was on his knees beside the murdered man.

"Dead?" At the sheriff's terse question, the rancher scrambled awkwardly to his feet. He nodded. "Drilled clean thru the heart. His clock stopped right away—and jest as he was agoin' tuh talk turkey." The rugged Fraser snorted with annoyance.

"Some snake didn't hanker he should run off at the mouth," said Pat thoughtfully. "Who would that be now?"

"You certainly can't incriminate me!" Montgomery's voice sounded from behind the sheriff. The Englishman swung his right arm in a careless circle. "There are witnesses galore. Well, gentlemen, I propose to make a beeline for the Gold Eagle to rinse that bottled hogwash out of my throat. Imagine popping off this mortal coil with that taste in one's mouth! Ugh!"

Nonchalantly, he pushed through the groups standing beneath the trees, uneasy and uncertain, like a spooked herd of steers on the verge of stampede.

Gradually, the grove emptied as men dribbled back to town. The raging fire of mob madness had quickly abated to a cold chill. From the talk

Markham was regarded as the guilty party—and he was dead. Who killed him, or why, did not greatly concern them. The consensus of opinion was that a member of the lynching party, impatient of delay, had taken matters into his own hands. But the sheriff disagreed; he was convinced Markham was silenced for a purpose.

Darkness mantled the grove as men extinguished their torches. Groping around in the gloom, Pat finally located his pony among a number of others tied beneath the trees. He hit leather and spurred his mount to a canter. The first step was to search the dead man's effects. His records might reveal the evidence that he had died trying to voice.

The Gold Eagle was jammed to the batwings and buzzing like a beehive. A torrent of sound rolled out into the quiet street—the steady monotone of deep voices, crackling of shouted expletives, tinkle of glasses, shuffling of feet. Pat drew rein, leaned forward in the saddle and glanced through the one dusty window. The other was still boarded up, awaiting a replacement from Pueblo. Remnants of a torn coat hanging from his shoulders, Montgomery sat on the bar, legs dangling. In one hand he held a bottle, in the other an empty glass. His ruddy features were animated as he bandied words with the men who thronged around him, men who shortly before had been yelling for his death. Now they drank with him and boisterously applauded as he emphasized his remarks by banging the bottle on the bar. The sheriff grunted and kneed the claybank. Men were mighty curious animals.

AT THE HOTEL desk, Shackleteeth Simpson, eyes big behind his steel spectacles, greeted Pat eagerly. "Heck of a fracas down at th' picnic grove! Feller shot and another bird almost swung. They say—"

"I was there!" cut in the sheriff, shortly. "Gimme a pass-key tuh 234—pronto!"

"Pass-key!" Shackleteeth cackled, his teeth clicking like castanets in accompaniment. "We don't need no pass keys. The locks is all the same. Use yore own key!"

Pat ascended the stairs two at a time, inserted his key in the lock of Markham's room. The door swung open and he stepped into the darkness.

Quickly, the sheriff snatched a match from his hatband, scratched it on the door jamb and set the light to the wick of a bracketed lamp. Then his gaze ran around the room. The plank table was clear of papers. Beneath it, an unstrapped valise gaped open. He spilled the contents on the table—socks, shirts, handkerchiefs, neckties, a bottel of hair oil, a clothes brush—nothing more. A suit of clothes and a linen duster hung from hooks on the wall. The pockets were empty.

He threw back the blankets on the brass bed, examined the mattress, fingered the pillow. Nothing came to light save a few soiled handkerchiefs.

Baffled, the sheriff stood with creased brow and eyed the disarray around him—something was missing, some article that had been in the room when he last braced Markham. Again he eyed the table, heaped high with the contents of the valise. Pens, ink, cigars, ah! The brown satchel! That was where the land buyer would keep his documents and private papers. Again Pat made a methodical search, investigating every nook and cranny of the drab hotel room. Finally, he desisted—the brown satchel was gone. Someone had been in the hotel room before him.

Down in the lobby, Shackleteeth dozed behind his showcase. Pat shook him into wakefulness.

"Say, who hit them stairs, ten, fifteen minutes, afore I drifted in? Think hard!"

The old fellow blinked, closed his eyes in rapt concentration. "Nary a soul, Pat," he clacked finally. "Folks was all at the lynchin'."

"Kin yuh swear tuh thet?" persisted the sheriff.

"Cross me heart and hope t' die," returned Shackleteeth solemnly.

"How come the boys didn't stretch thet fat jasper's neck instead of pluggin' him?"

"How come you know so danged much about the lynchin'?"

Shackleteeth's weak eyes slipped away before the sheriff's accusing stare. "Hell, Pat," he gulped, "everyone knew the boys was cookin' thet party up."

"They sure didn't let me in on it," growled Pat in disgust.

AT DAWN, he slipped out of the sleeping hotel and stepped into the silent street. The plankwalks were deserted save for a slinking cat. From the outskirts of town a cock threw a raucous challenge to the breaking day.

Picking his way cautiously through discarded bottles and empty cans, the sheriff moved down the alleyway at the side of the hotel and emerged on an expanse of bare ground, littered with debris, in the rear. A low leanto shed was built against the back of the hotel and used as a storage place for tools. Above it stretched a row of windows. From one dangled a strip of white cloth Pat had placed as a marker—it was the window of Markham's room.

The sheriff eyed the distance from the shed top to the windows. Too high for a man to reach and haul himself up! Picking his steps carefully, he bent and closely examined the ground beneath the murdered man's window. Two square indentations, about thirty inches apart, were impressed in the sandy earth.

"Ladder!" murmured the searcher. Imprints of a pair of boots, long and narrow, were thick around, some obliterated, others plain. Pat scrutinized them carefully, measured their length and width. Then he turned to the shed. The door was ajar. He peered inside. In the growing light, a clumsy homemade ladder, used around the hotel, was discernible, resting against the rear wall. Its rungs were 1 x 3's, nailed to square lengths of rough timber.

With a low whistle of satisfaction the sheriff closed the door and headed

had entered Markham's room by the window, using the hotel ladder. His feet were small and usually narrow. Ten to one, mused Pat, it was the same man that shot him. Or was it the Englishman? If he moved fast, he could have made it, and then hit for the Gold Eagle to establish an alibi. He had small feet; Pat remembered his neat, low-cut shoes. And did he blast Telford, the photographer?

THE SHERIFF smoked reflectively for a spell in the hotel lobby, grateful for the solitude as he reviewed the events of the past few days. After awhile, he drifted down the plankwalk to the All-American Restaurant and pushed aside the fly-curtains for an early breakfast. After cleaning up the usual stack of flapjacks, he ordered breakfast for the prisoner in the jail and moseyed towards his office.

Life was beginning to stir around town when Pat unlocked the iron-barred door of Beck's cell and pushed it open with his foot. A waiter from the restaurant stepped inside and set a tray, upon which was the prisoner's breakfast, on the bench which served as a bed.

Unshaven, dank hair unbrushed and clothes rumpled, the hawk-nosed man glared venomously at the sheriff. "I want outta this joint," he demanded harshly.

"Yore booked f'r abduction and suspicion of murder," said Pat coolly. "You'll rot in the pen ef you don't give me a line on the whereabouts of my wife."

"You can't railroad me," burst out Beck in a flurry of temper. "I wanta see a lawyer."

"Shore, I'll send you one in, but there ain't enough silver in Colorado tuh bail you outta here." Pat closed the door with a clang. If he summed up the ex-convict aright, Beck's was the bitter, revengeful type, a man who would nurse a fancied wrong until it poisoned his mind, burned into his brain. In the line of duty he had crippled the bank robber's hand. There was plain motive for Sally's kidnap-

to trial, the sheriff was convinced he would uncover sufficient evidence to convict. He was gambling too, that the ex-convict would break. In a cell, a man has twenty-four hours a day to do nothing but think. Pat refused to picture his happy, good-hearted wife as other than alive.

But Beck had his rights. The sheriff headed down street to rout out a lawyer.

Justus Sharman had opened his office in the two-storied frame building that housed the post office and feed store. A wooden outside stairway led upstairs from the alley beside the building. Opening off a short passageway were four rooms, rented as offices. The first was occupied by Sharman.

Pat unceremoniously threw open the lawyer's door and strode in. The lawyer was hunched over his desk, examining a pair of broken glasses. His dark head jerked up and he blinked at the visitor short-sightedly.

"Smashed in the fracas?" Pat nodded at the smashed glasses.

Sharman gave a wry smile. "It might have been worse," he acknowledged, "in that wolf pack."

"Wal, I gotta hand it tuh yuh," said the sheriff, "you got sand aplenty. Ain't many woulda faced thet locoed mob."

The lawyer dropped his broken glasses into a desk drawer "The law should be upheld, at all times," he replied brusquely.

"When a mob rules, justice is trampled into the dust. Last night's occurrence was regrettable, very regrettable." He leaned back and gazed levelly at the sheriff. There was sharp, almost querulous quality to his voice. He looked and acted like a tired man. His eyes were dark-circled. His slim fingers drummed nervously on the flat desk top. Well, considered the sheriff, Sharman was a city man, this was his first taste of the rougher side of the west. An attempted lynching is tough on any man's nerves.

"Wal," said Pat aloud, "the boys got cause tuh be riles. Powder Valley's busted flat." His tone changed. "I gotta hairpin in the jug who wants tuh see a lawyer. Name's Beck. Charge is Abduction."

Crisply, he told of his wife's disappearance and the hawk-nosed man's arrest on evidence of the chipped horse shoe.

"His defense?" queried Sharman, with awakening interest.

"He jest traded his cayuse f'r the hawss."

"Aren't you holding him on a very slender thread? Proof of his guilt seems entirely absent."

"There's angles," returned the sheriff shortly. "It'll come out at the trial."

The lawyer shrugged. "The brand of justice you dispense out west is certainly rough and ready. The man's only a suspect. He should be released on bail."

"And he'd split the breeze like greased lightning," snapped Pat. "Try and bail him out, mister!" With a cold smile the sheriff turned to the door.

SAM AND Ezra awaited him in the leanto office behind the Courthouse.

"Wal you double-crossin' old wart hog, you shore run a blazer over us last night," greeted Sam with asperity. "Time we hit the grove Markham was stiff and —"

"You'd dried up and blowed away," broke in Ezra, his good eye swiveling maliciously in the direction of his partner.

"Only difference betwixt you and a jackass," rapped out Sam, "is thet a jackass brays. Who salivated the hog, Pat?"

"The same guy who rustled his papers. Slick as a weasel, thet hombre." The sheriff sank into his familiar chair and rolled a smoke. "I got a swell description—of his feet."

"F'r gosh sakes," grumbled Sam. "What papers, and whar?"

Pat told of his discoveries at the hotel. "The way I see it," he concluded, "is thet a gang hit the Valley, dead set on grabbin' range. For why, the devil alone knows. Tuh sweeten their rolls, they spread blackleg. Then Bill Fraser stirs up the boys and stages a neck-tie par-

ty. Markham cracks, but afore he kin spill his guts they douse his light. Figgerin' quick, they clean out his room afore I could git there." He dribbled smoke through his lips. "I gotta feelin' in my bones thet something's due tuh break. Telford's crippled bad, Markham's a stiff, Beck's in the hoosegow. Ef we kin spot the king-pin, we bust their flush."

"Limey'd fill the bill," rumbled Ezra. "He's corraled range aplenty. Mebbe we could sweat it outta the son."

Pat shook his head. "Not him, he's tougher'n raw-hide, took a drink with the rope burnin' his neck. Telford's on the mend. I'll work on him jest as soon as Doc Trimble lets the bar down."

"Sally?" queried Sam.

The light went out of the sheriff's grey eyes, his shoulders raised in a gesture of helplessness.

A raw-boned hombre on a wild-eyed bronc branded with a downturn F, piled out of leather at the hitch rail. He dropped his reins and scuffed through the sand towards the office.

The sheriff watched his approach through the half-open door.

"Lazy Larboe from the Lazy F," he announced.

"Never seed him move so fast in a month of Sundays. What's Bill Fraser cooked up now?"

The gawky cowhand pushed a tousled head around the door.

"Beat it fer the ranch, pronto," he drawled.

"What's on Bill's mind?"

"Nuthin' much, I reckon, beyond tuning a harp."

"Bill daid!" gasped the three as one man.

"Deader'n a can of corned beef."

"Since when?" Pat rose, eyes inquisitive. "He was as spry as a two-year old last night."

"The biscuit shooter found him stiff in his bunk at sun-up," Lazy's jaws champed on a chaw of tobacco. "There was a knife stuck in his gizzard."

13

FIND THE motive, was the sheriff's dictum, where a killing was concerned. There was always a motive. Even a calloused professional gunman who would cut a man down as casually as he would take a drink, slew for pay. Others killed through passion, greed, hatred. What, then, was the motive behind the knifing of Bill Fraser? In his turbulent, stubborn life he had probably trodden on many toes. But, to the sheriff's knowledge, the tough old cowman had no sworn enemies. Quick of temper and as obstinate as a mule, he was a good boss. He paid well, fed well and drank with his rannies. The Lazy F crew was proud of the old tarantula and would back his play at any time. There were no close relatives to benefit by his death, no relatives at all, as far as Pat knew.

Was the mysterious "blackleg" gang exacting vengeance for Markham's death? If Pat's theory held water, the fat land buyer had been plugged by a member of his own gang to close his mouth. Sure, Bill Fraser was plenty eager to tackle the job, but the slug, whining through the night, had cheated him.

These thoughts raced through the sheriff's mind as he eyed Lazy's homely features.

"Any Mex on the spread?" he inquired, bulking on his gun belt.

The cowhand chuckled. "Bill never cottoned to them. Ain't sighted one on the Lazy F in a coon's age."

Pat turned to his partners. "You wanna ride?"

Sam pressed forward. "Yuh ditched us last night, Pat Stevens, and we missed the biggest show staged around Dutch Springs since you an Ezra forted up in the bank."

"Sally, too," corrected Pat quickly.

"Yuh bet, thet gal shore sided you gazaboos. Like I was saying, we ain't missin' this."

Lazy slouched against the door jamb. "Me, I ain't in no hurry, got a

little business down at the Gold Eagle."

"Pass the word along tuh Doc," directed Pat, and headed for the livery barn.

The three jogged north-west, towards a low range of hills, dark-smeared against the blue horizon. For an hour they drummed steadily through sage and mesquite, across a sea of yellowing prairie. The ponies' hooves crushed the zinc colored sage brush, wadded thick on the sun-baked swales, releasing the pungent odor, which hung heavy on the still, heat-burdened air.

Slowly the hills took form, dark veined with steep ravines, thick with scrub oak and brush. The terrain swelled and became more broken, like the uneasy waves of a restless sea. Blackjack timber clothed the benches, and Lazy F steers clustered in its sparse shade, motionless except for switching tails. The still blades of a windmill shone like burnished silver above a low ridge.

THE THREE breasted the slope and eyed the Lazy F, sprawled over the plain ahead, a hodge-podge of corrals and barns, with a squat unpainted frame house stuck in the center. Bill Fraser batched with his riders and was stronger for utility than style.

Jack Danvers, sun-bleached, wrinkled Lazy F foreman, rose leisurely from the shade of the bunkhouse as they thudded into the yard. Around the barns and corrals men went through the motions of working, but it was plain they did little more. Like a watch with a broken main spring the big spread looked much the same as before, but its driving force was gone.

"Lo, Jack!" The sheriff swung to the ground. "Trouble, eh?"

Danvers grunted moodily, chewing a straw. "Some dirty son got Bill with a pig-sticker last night."

"Any ideas?"

"Nope." The foreman spat out the straw and stood gloomily contemplatting the ground. "Bill took a bunch of the boys tuh town. I hit the hay. Reckon they rode in 'bout midnight Bill had a few drinks aboard. Headed f'r his bunk in th' house. Reckon thet's all."

"Who found him?"

"Charlie, the cookie. He rousts Bill f'r breakfast, regular."

"Anyone been pokin' around?" Pat nodded towards the house.

"Nope!" declared the foreman emphatically. "Bill ain't a pleasant sight. I sent Lazy tuh town and closed everything tight."

"Keeno!" commented the sheriff, with approval. He walked across the bare earth of the yard towards the boxlike ranch dwelling. An open porch in its front was littered with saddlery.

Pat eased open the door and stepped into a rudely furnished room. The plank floor was innocent of covering, the windows shadeless and without curtains. A square table stood in the room's center. Upon its dusty top were crumpled newspapers, a greasy pack of cards and a well-thumbed mail order catalog. Two chairs stood against the further wall, one was set by the table, another lay overturned.

Danvers jerked his head towards the upset chair. "Reckon Bill tripped over thet in the dark. He carried a full load."

To the right a door opened upon the bedroom, as bare and uninviting as the living room. Pat glimpsed the end of a brass bedstead. As he entered and sighted the figure on the bed, the others crowding at his heels, the sheriff recoiled involuntarily.

The murdered man lay on his back, fully clothed, a grey blanket partially covering his body. His face was flaccid and devoid of all expression, the heavy jaw slack. Wide, open, his eyes stared sightlessly at the fly-specked ceiling. From his mahogany-tanned throat protruded the black bone haft of a knife, studded with bright steel rivets. Like brown rust, dry blood stains matted his grey shirt and made rivulets through the black hair on his chest. Fingers hooked, his gnarled hands dug deep into the mattress, as

though he steeled himself to receive the death blow.

OUTSIDE, the rattle of a buckboard drew the eyes of the silent group to the window. Tubby, officious Doc Trimble, coroner and undertaker, tied his team, grabbed the inevitable black bag and briskly mounted the porch steps, like a sprightly cock sparrow.

He bustled into the room. At sight of the victim, he released a disapproving "Tut, tut—homicide!" and bent over the corpse.

"How long Bill been daid, Doc?" asked Pat.

The little doctor fingered the stiff arms of the dead man, "Rigor mortis!" he murmured. He worked down towards the legs.

"Seven-eight hours." he announced crisply.

"Thet places the killin' about two, three o'clock," commented Pat. He turned to Danvers, "Anyone ride in—later'n Bill?"

"Nope," returned the foreman positively. "The boys all lickered up at the Gold Eagle and hit f'r home in a bunch."

"Charlie, the cook, he's as techy as a teased snake, he got anything agenst Bill?"

"Wal." Danvers expectorated slowly. "Charlie's mostly on the peck, never seed a cook thet warn't. He locked horns with Bill occasional."

"Thet looks mighty like a butcher knife," commented Pat significantly. "Mebbe, I'll go brace Charlie. You jasper find yoreselves a nice patch of shade and build a smoke."

He knew the cook as a freckled, fiery-eyed old timer, with thinning sandy har and pronounced limp. Like many another dough wrangler, he was a former puncher, crippled by a falling horse. And like many another, his disposton had been permanently soured by the change of occupaton.

The cook shack was a leanto alongside the bunkhouse. One end, boarded off, was the kitchen. A long plank table, sided by benches, occupied the balance of the space and served as mess room.

Charlie was peeling spuds when Pat quietly slid in the door. The sheriff nodded, braced for a volley of expletives from the belligerent cook. But Charlie said nothing, bent to his task in glum, sullen silence.

Pat glanced around the walls. Pots and pans, sharp-edged cleavers, shiny meat saws hung on hooks. A heavy wooden block for cutting meat, stood by the big wood range. Nearby, a small box was set on a bench. Pat stepped over and glanced inside. In it, lay half a dozen butcher knives of varying sizes—all had black bone handles and steel rivets.

He wheeled quickly and his eyes focused on Charlie's bent grey head. "You found Bill?"

"Yeah!" growled the cook, engrossed in his potato peeling.

"See the knife in his throat?"

"Shore."

"Know whar it come from?"

The cook said nothing. Pat crossed the shack in three swift steps and grabbed him by the shoulder. Charlie struggled like a cornered animal, shook free and stumbled across the room. Flattened against the wall, he faced the sheriff, stark fear in his dilated eyes. "I didn't curl him up, Pat Gawd's truth!" he croaked. "I found him stiff as a board. Figgered he was dead drunk, 'til," the cook shuddered violently, "I lamped my butcher knife."

"Quit lyin'!" rasped the sheriff. "What made the trouble?"

"There warn't no trouble." The sharp-tongued old puncher was shaking, all the belligerence had oozed out of his aging frame. "It's like I said Pat, I swear it!"

Pat stuck his head out of the doorway and shouted, "Sam!"

Eager-eyed, the squat man came at the run.

"Take Charlie up tuh the bunkhouse and throw his stuff together. He's goin' back tuh town."

Hands clasping and unclasping nervously, the cook limped out at Sam's heels. "I never kilt no one," he wailed.

"Shore," sympathized Sam. "You never knowed nuthin' about it. You was too doggoned drunk."

Pat watched the pair out of sight,

then hit for the silent house again. Doc Trimble had pulled out. The sheriff closed the door behind him and entered the death room.

Set at the foot of the bed was an ancient, iron-bound trunk. He hefted the heavy lid, the trunk was locked. A closed rolltop desk stood against the wall. This, too, was securely locked. It was plain robbery was not the motive. There were no other furnishings save a chair with rawhide seat.

The sheriff turned his attention to the grisly figure on the bed. He grasped the handle of the knife, stiffly embedded in the dead man's throat, first with his right hand, then the left. Next he strolled out into the rude living room, eyes alert. He walked around the over-turned chair eyeing it with creased brow. His gaze traveled over the untidy floor, strewn with cigarette butts, corks, match ends. Of a sudden, he tensed, then dropped on hands and knees, searching through the debris around the upset chair with minute care. At length, satisfied, he rose and stepped out into the sunshine.

FOUR RIDERS jogged back to Dutch Springs, stirrup to stirrup, Ezra and Charlie rode ahead, the cook slumped and wilting under the pitiless sun. Behind, the sheriff and Sam swayed easily in their saddles.

"Never had Charlie figgered f'r a killer," Sam kneed his pony closer to Pat, eager to talk. "The old catamount's got a hair-trigger temper," he continued, "and I reckon he had run-ins aplenty with pore Bill, but he ain't the killin' kind. Musta been crazy drunk."

"Charlie never knifed Bill," returned the sheriff, squinting ahead.

"What!" almost howled Sam. "Then whyinell—"

"Circumstantial evidence," drawled Pat. "Bill was knifed—it was Charlie's knife—Charlie and Bill had lotsa opportunity—Charlie found the body."

"Wal, ain't thet plenty tuh swing him?"

"Nope! Charlie's right-handed, a left-handed man knifed Bill. 'Sides, ef Charlie was sober enough tuh stick Bill, he'd be sober enough tuh fork a bronc and hit f'r the Barrens—he had six hours or more tuh split the breeze in."

"Then why grab the old moseyhorn?"

"Tuh fool the killer. We'll take Charlie in and go through the motions. The guy who knifed Bill figgered he'd throw dust in our eyes. Wal, why put him wise?"

"Any notion who 'twas?" asked Sam sharply.

Pat grinned—for the first time in days. "Wal," he admitted, "mebbe I have, but I ain't talkin', yet."

14

TWO MEN WERE cooped in the little Dutch Springs adobe jail, both awaiting trial on murder charges. In one cell, Charlie, the Lazy F cook, hunched on his bunk staring blank-eyed at the wall, crushed and spiritless. Across the corridor, Jules Beck paced the beaten earth behind the bars like a caged cougar, cursing impartially the waiter who brought his meals, the sheriff, the town and his unresponsive fellow prisoner.

Out front in the office, Pat stretched his long legs and listened carefully to silvery-haired Judge Bemis. The tall mild-eyed jurist's voice was equable and even. It was said that the judge settled more cases by tactful suggestion in the privacy of his chambers or outside the courthouse than he did on the bench.

"I presume you have excellent reasons for opposing the release of Beck on bail," he was saying. "Justus Sharman, the man's attorney, is naturally pressing for his client's liberation. He points out, rightfully perhaps, that personal considerations lead you to be unduly severe. I can fully sympathize with you. Your wife is a charming woman and her disappearance is a terrible blow—to all of us. However Pat, we are both sworn to dispense justice and uphold the law. I cannot help but incline to

Sharman's view that the evidence is slender and that this Beck, who claims to be an innocent prospector, is entitled to the benefit of the doubt." He coughed. "Now in the case of Charlie, obviously guilty of a brutal murder, I would have no hesitation in denying an application for bail. Don't you think it might be well to reconsider?"

He leaned back in his chair and eyed the frowning sheriff keenly. The judge and Pat Stevens had worked together for more years than they cared to count, and friction had never developed.

"Nope, Judge," returned Pat decisively. "I don't agree. Sharman can't be blamed f'r trying tuh spring his man, but Beck's a cold-blooded lobo. Innercent prospector, hell! Afore I crippled his gun hand he had a record in three states. He was in on thet snatch, evenin' up the score, I guess. But thet ain't all. They's a gang spreadin' blackleg in the Valley tuh cut land values. Markham woulda give the show away, but they stopped him—fast. I reckon Telford's in on the deal—he got a slug in the guts. It's like a spider's web, Jedge, and we ain't spotted the spider—yet.

"Sam's a shrewd little son of a gun. He's got the idea they grabbed Sally tuh toll me away, so as tuh git a free hand around here. Mebbe Sam's on the right track. Ef so, Beck's in on the deal. I got more ideas, but I cain't spread my hand, right now. It'd be a fool's play tuh spring Beck."

Pat relaxed in the swivel chair after his lengthy oratorical effort and busied himself building a smoke.

INTEREST quickened in Judge Bemis' eyes. "Perhaps I oversimplified matters," he murmured. "Well Pat, I respect your judgement, bail will be denied." He rose.

"Thanks, Jedge!" The sheriff extended his hand in a spontaneous gesture of goodwill. "Ef you have a cause tuh regret it, I'll hand in my star."

Sam kicked open the door and bounded in, excitement sparkling in his dark eyes. He dumped an armful of mail on the desk. "Lamp thet!" he jerked out, tossing a copy of *The Pueblo Weekly Record* into the sheriff's lap.

CHICAGO & RIO GRANDE MAY LINK WITH OVERLAND.

It is reported that negotiations are under way whereby the Chicago & Rio Grande may swing its transcontinental line, now under construction, north to link up with the Overland at Folton, Colorado. Rumors have been circulating for some time that the Chicago & Rio Grande has been meeting with unforeseen construction difficulties, particularly in the Chusha Mountains. Expenditures have already exceeded estimates by several million dollars and if the line follows the original course of survey it is believed the cost will prove prohibitive.

Steel is already laid to the Chaco River and new surveys indicate that by swinging north, comparatively level terrain will be traversed, and many millions in construction costs saved. In addition, the elimination of mountain grades will result in sizable operational economies. No official confirmation of the change of plan had been received up to press time.

"Git it!" exclaimed the sheriff, swinging round to a dusty map on the wall. Dignity forgotten, the judge crowded Sam to follow the course of Pat's forefinger as he traced a line from the Chaco River to Folton. The space he wiped clean of dust ran clear through Powder Valley.

"The land buying activities of Mr. Chauncey Montgomery and the late Mortimer H. Markham are now fully explained," murmured Judge Bemis.

"Shore," spat Sam tartly. "They beat the ranchers outta their land so they'll fill their pockets when they resell tuh the railroad. But the lousy buzzards warn't satisfied, they gotta spread blacklaig so they kin pick the bones of the pore sons. Whyinell

didn't Bill Fraser string up thet damned limey?"

"Say!" said Pat softly, studying the map. "This is big, they's millions in it."

"And dirt f'r Powder Valley," amended his pard acidly.

"Any legal way tuh nullify them sales, Jedge?" The sheriff eyed the jurist hopefully.

Bemis shook his head in regretful negation. "I'm afraid not, Pat. There was no misrepresentation and no compulsion. Our people sold of their own free will. Better pass the word around immediately and stop this unholy looting."

Sam cackled. "No need tuh pass the word, it's all over town awready."

"But, Jedge," persisted Pat. "Ef we kin prove these land buyin' sons ruined the ranchers to force 'em tuh sell, wouldn't thet come under the head of undue influence, or something? Couldn't we nullify the sales contracts?"

Judge Bemis rocked on his heels, considering the question. "Yes," he stated finally. "I think so, if you can *prove* it. But remember, Pat, there is a vast difference between supposition and legal proof."

WHEN THE Judge left, Sam's insatiable curiosity was manifested. "What was the Jedge doin' around heah?" he demanded.

"Beck's itchin' tuh break outta the cooler."

"And his mouthpiece is puttin' the pressure on Bemis," chuckled Sam. "I ain't surprised. You shoulda heard thet lobo ridin' his lawyer 'smorning. He damned pore Sharman from here tuh hell-and-gone. Called him every name he could lay his tongue to And it didn't faze Sharman, a mite. No sirree! He jest stood there and smiled. Tole thet p'ison-tongued coyote thet ef he didn't put a dally on his tongue it u'd tangle in a rope."

The sheriff nodded absently, his mind on weightier affairs than Sam's small talk. He felt a responsibility towards the citizens of Powder Valley. For years he had lived among them, shared their triumphs and defeats, joys and sorrows. True, they had their faults, like all humans, but they were his friends and neighbors. They banked on him, as sheriff, to crush lawlessness and protect their rights. If he failed now, when a lawless gang had spread ruin throughout the Valley, he felt he could never hold up his head again. The crooks' scheme was plain, but, like the judge said, he must have proof. He felt as though he were fighting ghosts—the evidence of their foul word was everywhere, yet they forever skulked in the dark. Telford's shooting, Markham's killing, the murder of Bill Fraser, the kidnapping of Sally—all these occurrences, he was convinced, tied into the unholy scheme. If he could only read the signs aright they would make a pattern that would reveal the master brain behind it all. As always, his thoughts strayed to limey—that polished, devil-may-care dude, who was greased lightning with a gun and whose appetite for land was insatiable.

CHAUNCEY Montgomery, blissfully unconscious of the sheriff's suspicions, contentedly puffed at his briar and headed for the home of Dr. Trimble.

Beady black eyes glowering against the copper of her stolid face, Tina answered his knock on the door.

"Is the good doctor at home?" inquired the dude.

"Doctor—he go Box H—man break leg."

"How unfortunate! May I see Mr. Telford?"

"No see!"

"But I insist!" The Englishman took a quick step forward. The swarthy squaw hastily slammed the door, opened it again slightly and peered through the crack. "No see!" she repeated.

The dude plunged his right hand into a pants pocket, held up a glisting gold eagle. "Just two minutes!" he pleaded. "Merely to say hello."

A dusky palm was thrust forward. He dropped the coin into it. Without further word, Tina opened the door wide, turned and led the way into the house.

She threw open the door of a small

bedroom in the rear and the dude passed inside. While the squaw stood like a dusky sentinel in the doorway, he approached the long figure stretched on a cot with closed eyes.

For several moments the dude stood gazing down silently on Telford's pallid features. The wounded man's eyes, cavernous against his drawn white face, flicked open.

"Close call, eh, Telford?" said the visitor softly. "Any questioning?"

Almost imperceptibly, the photographer shook his head.

"Well, that long-nosed sheriff will be around before long. Shrewd lad, that! The story broke in the Pueblo paper and it's all over the Valley by now. Remember, a simple photographer sees nothing, hears nothing, knows nothing. Good luck, old boy! You'll be as frisky as a colt within the month."

Escorted by the taciturn Tina, he left the house.

A COPY of *The Pueblo Weekly Record* folded beneath his arm, Montgomery lit the oil lamp bracketed above his bed and turned the wick high. The yellow flame wavered in the night breeze that stole through the wide open window.

He turned to the wash-stand, uncorked a whisky bottle and trickled out a short drink. A sheet of paper, pinned to the wall, rustled in the breeze.

Montgomery eyed it, read slowly and set down his drink untasted. He jerked the sheet free, and reread:

WARNING
GIT OUT OF POWDER VALLEY.
THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE.

"Well I'll be damned!" he muttered. Still grasping the warning with one hand, he downed his drink, then loaded the bowl of his pipe. Carefully fashioning the sheet into a spill, he crossed the room, ignited the stick of paper from the lamp flame and touched it to his pipe . . . a slug droned through the open window like a maddened bee. Smashed into fragments, the pipe flew from his fingers. The bullet embedded itself in the door jamb with a flat thud.

15

EVEN AS FRAGMENTS of his smashed pipe spattered over the the worn carpet, Montgomery whirled and blacked out the oil lamp behind him. Dropping to the floor, he crawled towards the window—a luminous rectangle against the darkness of the room. Derringer gripped in his right hand, the Englishman cautiously raised his head above the window sill, searching for his unseen assailant.

In the starlight the debris-strewn flat behind the hotel was a shadowland. Nothing stirred. Then an empty can rattled beneath the window. Montgomery craned his head forward, gripping hard on the stubbarreled gun. A cur strayed into view, moving through the litter.

The Englishman reached up and jerked down the frayed window shade, groped his way across the room and re-lit the lamp. The stem of his shattered pipe was still gripped between his teeth.

"Best damned pipe I ever smoked," he muttered with chagrin, tossing the jagged stem into a corner. "These natives are blasted quick on the trigger."

After another drink, he propped a chair at an angle with its back beneath the door knob, effectually preventing entrance. Then he shucked off his clothes and slid between the sheets.

THE SUN was well above the horizon when Chauncey Montgomery, arrayed in an even sportier tweed suit than the one which was ruined on the night of the attempted lynching, strolled negligently through the hotel lobby.

Shackleteeth, hovering around his showcase, was obviously ill at ease. He fussed with the register as the Englishman descended the stairs, darting quick glances at the tweeded figure.

At Montgomery's genial "Good

morning!" the clerk coughed, glanced quickly out into the quiet, sun-swept street and edged forward.

The Englishmen's alert eyes missed nothing. He stopped and waited expectantly as the old clerk moved slowly toward him, false teeth clacking nervously.

"They's a stage through today, Mr. Montgomery," he faltered.

"Regular schedule, I presume," returned the other lightly.

"Er-yes. Mebbe you'd like tuh stick around the hotel 'til it pulls out."

The Englishman's blue eyes bored into the fumbling old clerk's withered features. "I say, old chap, is that a warning?" He stepped close. His arm shot out and he grasped the clerk by the shoulder.

"What do you know about last night's shooting?" His voice was brittle. "Speak up, or I'll choke the truth out of you." The impact of his grip jarred Shackleteeth's artificial dentures loose. The plate clattered to the floor and the clerk dove after it with an anguished cry. Recovering his prized teeth, he scuttled behind the showcase.

Montgomery's demeanor changed. Again his features were wreathed with a pleasant, slightly silly, smile. "Pardon my rudeness, old fellow! Bad case of nerves, I'm afraid. Here, a little solace!" He slid a gold coin across the glass-topped showcase. "Now tell me, my dear chap, why should I take the stage?"

Shackleteeth carefully wiped off his molars and eased them into place. Before the other's intent scrutiny he shuffled his feet uneasily. "It ain't noways safe around Dutch Springs," he mumbled.

"Why?" persisted Montgomery.

The old clerk shook his graying head doggedly. "I ain't talkin'. I don't crave tuh be worm feed."

The Englishman shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

Again, Shackleteeth's appealing voice reached his ears, urgent with desperation. "Keep off the street, mister! And git outta town—pronto!"

Montgomery paid no attention. Eyes searching, he stood inside the wide hotel entrance and surveyed the scene outside. Nothing untoward was apparent. A freight wagon churned slowly past behind a string of mules. Across the pitted roadway, an overalled rancher leaned against a post, sucking a cigarette. Further along, two grey-shirted riders lounged against the planked window of The Gold Eagle. Another hunkered against the front of the feed store.

Whistling blithely, the Englishman stepped on to the plankwalk. The overalled figure opposite galvanized into quick action. His gun arced up. A slug splintered the woodwork behind Montgomery's head. As the report thundered, the Englishman's derringer snaked out. He fired, ducked, ran crouching toward the hitch rail. His opponent stepped into the road, his .45 again swinging down. Again it roared. Montgomery's weapon barked swift reply. The overalled man jerked to full height, tottered, dropped slackly into the dust.

But the two loiterers in front of the saloon had also gone into action, and the man hunkered outside the feed store was on his feet, thumbing the hammer of a bucking gun. From an alley on Montgomery's left, a hidden marksman steadily plunked lead.

Whining slugs kicked up tiny eddies of grey dust around the Englishman's crouching figure, phutted into the hotel front, scarred the plankwalk. He darted out into the street, ziz-zagging like a scared jack rabbit through a hail of buzzing lead. Throwing himself flat beside the prone figure of the man he had downed, he gathered up the dead man's forty-five from the dust and unbuckled his gun belt. Miraculously still unhit by converging streams of lead, he spurted, for an alley-way ahead—gun gripped in one hand, gunbelt swinging in the other.

SHELTERED momentarily from his assailants, the panting Montgomery quickly buckled the gunbelt above his narrow hips, broke the gun and plugged out the empties. Thrusting fresh loads into the cylinder, he rolled it into the frame, slipped back the pin and cocked the gun.

Flattened against the side of the building, his eyes gleaming blue slits, the Englishman eased forward. The street within his range of vision was deserted.

"One on the right, three on the left," he muttered, "and a hell of a hole behind me."

A gun barked from up street and wood chipped from the siding above his head. He pulled back, eyes probing. The faint tinkle of a spur chain carried to his ear. He jumped for the opposite wall, pushed out his head and quickly glanced to the right. A rider was inching forward along the store fronts, not ten paces distant. Both guns spoke at once, their flame and thunder blending. The grey-shirted figure dropped.

Montgomery's head snapped back, as hot lead seared his forehead, scouring a scarlet groove.

Again, ominous silence descended. The Englishman hastily wiped away the blood that trickled down to his eye-brows and waited—as tensed as a terrier.

From higher up the narrow alley in which he crouched another gun opened up. The bullet ricocheted and screamed past him into the blue. He swung around. Smoke haze lingered above a garbage can. In quick succession he threw two slugs into the can. With a sharper, deadlier note, a Winchester spanged from behind a heap of lumber at the alley's end.

Driven like an animal from its lair, Montgomery ran out upon the plankwalk, headed for the shelter of a pile of feed sacks, stacked outside the mercantile store. Instantly, to right and left, guns roared, lacing his fast moving form with lead. Once, twice, he threw down in stubborn reply. Then a slug ripped into his right leg. He dropped, hauled up to sitting position and leveled hs gun. Another bullet tore into his right shoulder. The gun dropped from his nerveless fingers and he slumped sideways. A third screaming slug bedded in his side—helpless, he squirmed over the worn planks in agony.

A bloody mist clouded his sight and a thickening fog blotted out his senses. As from infinite distance, he heard a woman scream . . . then he sank down, down, down, into the depths.

Phyllis Hampton heard the deep roar of the forty-five as she stepped briskly down the boarding house steps. A sharper report followed, then the staccato of rapid fire.

Up the street, two little girls, headed for school, paused irresolutely. Beyond them, four small boys, with excited yells, scampered for Main Street.

For a moment, the teacher froze in quick panic. Realization of the children's danger came quick. Screaming a warning, she rushed after the running boys. At the Cattlemen's Bank, on the corner, a man's hoarse shout stopped them. They bunched against the brisk wall of the bank, edging towards the corner and peering towards the barking guns.

Breathless, hair awry and shirt dusty, their teacher descended upon them from the rear and hustled the four protesting, indignant youngsters into a nearby doorway.

The shooting died away. Miss Hampton, half-fearfully, peeked around the corner herself. Opposite the Jewel Hotel a figure sprawled in the street. Another lay on the plankwalk. Then gunfire rolled again. She saw a tweeded figure dart out of an alley, dash towards the store. Guns thundered up and down the street.

Horror froze the shriek in her throat as she recognized Montgomery—saw him go down. Skirts billowing, she flew down Main Street, broke through the closing circle of grim-eyed ranchers. Ignoring their shouts and curses, she dipped under the hitch rail and dropped on her knees beside the bloodied form.

A gun in each fist, the sheriff came looping along the plankwalk. Face tragic, the girl looked up as he gained her side. Around, men closed in—bunched around.

"What's doin'?" grated Pat, grey eyes sweeping the silent circle.

"We give the coyote his come-uppance," growled a sober-faced rancher defiantly. "He done busted us—we busted him."

No one would have recognized the

disheveled, flushed young woman who defied them all with flashing eyes, as the prim Miss Hampton. "You mean, yellow cowards!" she shrilled. "You've killed him! And he's a better man than the whole bunch of you. Get the doctor! Don't stand there gawking!"

"Mebbe he don't need a doctor," said Pat laconically. He dropped down beside the girl, made a quick examination. "Reckon the gent's full of lead," he commented, "but it ain't stopped his clock, yet. Bill! Hotfoot f'r the doc. The rest of you jiggers mosey down tuh the office—and no shenanigans!"

There was no school session in Dutch Springs that day. Phyllis Hampton hovered around Montgomery's bullet-torn body like a guardian angel, walked by his side when they toted his unconscious form up to Doc Trimble's bungalow. Waited while the little doctor probed and patched and fixed up the remnants in which life still lingered. Then, stark tragedy in her brown eyes, the girl retired to the seclusion of her room.

IN THE office, Pat discussed the fracas with Sam and Ez.

"Reckon he had it comin'," he pronounced curtly. "Thet newspaper report drove 'em loco. Yuh cain't hogswiggle folks in Powder Valley, and git away with it. Ef I arrest the crazy galoots there ain't a jury would convict. Mebbe we'll git peace and quiet from now on."

"Seems tuh me you was hankerin' f'r action, awhile back," rasped Sam. "Wal, yuh got yuhr wish!"

"And don't stake yuhr dinero on peace and quiet," rumbled Ezra. "There's more of them rattlesnakes acrawlin' around—yuh ain't fergot Sally?"

"Fergot her!" The sheriff's voice was almost a groan. "Hell man, I cain't think of nothing else."

Saginaw Sam tossed off the biweekly mail sack, cracked his whip and piloted the yellow Concord down Main Street.

Half an hour later, Pop Gunter, the postmaster, hurried down the plankwalk as fast as his shaky pins would propel him, waving a letter.

He burst upon the amazed Sheriff and breathlessly thrust the letter into his hand. "Ef thet ain't Sally's handwritin' I'm a braying jackass," he gasped, and collapsed into a chair.

Eyes unbelieving, Pat fingered the slim envelope. It bore a Pueblo postmark. "Gawd, Pop!" he breathed hoarsely. "It is!"

His brown fingers trembled as he tore open the flap. Silently, he devoured the contents:

Dearest:

I am safe and sound. Robbers have made me a prisoner. Oh, I do so long to be home again, but that depends upon you, sweetheart. Because they threaten me with a fate worse than death if you do not hand in your star and leave the Valley. But if you do, they promise to release me unharmed. Every day I think of you and Dock and the happy days that seem so far away. Regardless of the consequences, I beg and pray that you do as I ask. Send in your resignation and go to Pueblo, I will join you there. Remember the happiness we once had? Oh, how I wish I was free again. Or, I had you and Dock with me. Send in your resignation quickly please, dear. Think of your heartbroken wife,

Sally.

The sheet was stained by what were suspiciously like tears.

Misty-eyed, Pat turned to the old postmaster.

"She's all right, Pop. Some varmints are holdin' her." He eyed the sheet somberly. "Reckon I gotta figure this out alone."

16

PAT STEVENS had been in many a tight corner, but never one as tight as this. Always he had been able to blast himself out with his ready guns, or slide off the hot spot by the exercise of quick wit. In his present predicament neither

would avail. It was open and shut—either he surrendered his badge and slunk out of Powder Valley like a beaten cur, or he sacrificed his wife. Pride and sense of duty urged him to face it out. Love for Sally and thought of her probable fate pulled him in the opposite direction.

The longer he considered the problem the more insoluble it seemed. Finally, he folded the precious note, placed it in his pocket and paced the office—considering the dilemma with creased brow.

Sam and Ezra broke in upon his solitary cogitations.

"Say!" challenged the squat Sam indignantly, "howcome everything happens around heah when we're some place else? The town's buzzin' with talk about limey goin' on the rampage, downin' two jaspers afore they made a sieve outta the son. Give us the straight, Pat!"

The sheriff groaned inwardly. There were times when he wished the voluble Sam was elsewhere.

"The boys ganged up on Montgomery," he explained patiently. "Right now what's left of him is up at Doc Trimble's."

"You sound like you was dealt a Dead Man's Hand—what's eatin' yuh?" inquired the squat man, with a sharp glance at Pat's hard-set features.

For answer, the sheriff yanked Sally's letter out of his pocket and handed it over, without a word.

Sam ran his eyes over it, whistled incredulously, and passed it to Ezra.

"Thet shore ain't no bum steer, like the last. Where'd she mail it?"

"Sally didn't mail it—it was postmarked Pueblo."

"Lemme give it the once-over agen," demanded Sam. He examined the stained sheet carefully.

"It's shore Sally's writin'," he commented, voice puzzled, "but it ain't her style. Thet gal's got spunk aplenty. It jest don't fit her, somehows."

"Ef you was in her shoes, you'd write the same," grunted Ezra. "Figger how she's fixed—caged up, mebbe mistreated. 'Nuf tuh drive the gal loco."

"Reckon Ezra's right," said Pat quietly. "Sally's worried stiff, and she's shore got cause aplenty."

"You gonna hand in yore star?" demanded Sam sharply.

The sheriff dropped into his swivel chair, folded his arms and eyed his two pards gloomily. "Would you?" he demanded harshly.

"Yuh cain't do nuthin' else," boomed Ezra. "They got yuh by the short hairs."

"Hold it!" cut in Sam. "What'll Powder Valley think of Pat? Ef he unpins thet badge right now, when the hull valley's chewin' gravel, they'll brand him a quitter and a yellow dawg, and you know it. Hell, you jest cain't quit, Pat!"

"But Sally—" expostulated the big redhead.

"Sally wouldn't ask it—not thet gal!"

"Kin yuh read?" roared Ezra, pointing a huge forefinger at the letter in Pat's hand.

"Aw!" muttered the squat Sam sulkly. "Mebbe she wrote it, but she shore didn't mean it, not ef I know Sally. Say!" His voice rose as a thought struck him. "Sally's a smart gal, there wouldn't be no hidden message, something tucked between the lines like?"

Pat reluctantly shook his head. "I guess not. She wrote thet with two or three lobos watchin' every word. They ain't takin' chances."

Sam took the letter and held it against the murky window pane, eying it critically. With downcast features, he handed it back to the sheriff. "Figgered thet mebbe she'd pricked something with a pin," he explained lamely. "Ef we only knew the gal's whereabouts!"

"Reckon there ain't nuthin' tuh do but turn thet star in," rumbled Ezra. "Cain't save her no other way."

Pat's lips tightened. Grey eyes hard, he rose and faced the two. "I'm freezin' on tuh the star," he said shortly. "The sons are in a tight, or they wouldn't have had Sally write thet letter. Ef they're crooked enough tuh grab her, they're crooked enough tuh hold her ef I quit and head f'r Pueblo. B'gawd!" his voice sank to a

throaty growl. "I'll git them coyotes, ef it takes a lifetime."

Silently, Sam held out his hand. The sheriff grasped it. Then Ezra extended his huge paw. "It's a deal," he boomed. "We'll leave our bones on the trail afore we quit."

The pair rode out of town, homeward bound. Pat—left alone—again studied the creased sheet, whose contents he knew now by heart. Mebbe there was something in what Sam said—Sally had buried a clue to her whereabouts in those tear-stained lines. As he scanned it, word by word, he was conscious of a curious sensation, as though Sally's unseen presence filed the dingy little office, urging him on.

But the letter yielded nothing. Reason told the sherff it could yield nothing, written beneath the eyes of her captors. Wearily, he stowed it away and lifted his Stetson off a peg.

SHACKLETEETH greeted him eagerly at the hotel desk. The old man's faded eyes sparkled behind his steel specs. His teeth clacked like the hooves of a galloping pony.

"Ain't thet limey a fightin' fool, Pat! I seed it all—like a box seat at the opery. Warned him but he jest grinned and walked out inter their guns. Plugged two of the hairpins, too, afore—"

"Anyone been in his room?" broke in the sheriff, shortly.

"Not a shadder, except maybe the maid, tuh make up his bed."

Pat ran up the stairs. His step quickened as he noticed that the door of 217 was ajar. A woman, in white apron, stepped out, carrying a bulging pillow case.

"Mrs. Benton!" he exclaimed, in surprise.

The nester's wife dumped the dirty linen in the corridor and turned towards him with a resigned smile. "Yes, it's me, Sheriff. It was either starve in Rattlesnake Gulch or work in town. So I hitched up the team and brought the kids in."

"Ain't Baldy around?"

"That worthles hunk of trash!" she snapped. "He skittered out and left us to fend for ourselves. Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say!"

The indignant Mrs. Benton reentered the room, the sheriff at her heels. The bed was freshly made, but nothing else had apparently been disturbed. Mrs. Benton seized a broom.

"Finish the job later," directed Pat. "I wanna poke around."

He closed the door behind her, then eyed the room. As before, books cumbered the wash stand, in company with a partially filled whisky bottle and glass. Articles of clothing hung upon hooks. The sheriff methodically searched pockets, but found nothing.

Next he unstrapped the bulging suitcase. It contained personal belongings, no letters or written records. Another valise, gaping open, sat in a corner. The contents of this, too, threw no light upon the Englishman's activities.

Pat locked the door behind him and hit for Doc Trimble's. The sun was sinking behind the Culebras and shadows crept across Main Street.

Tina admitted him. The little doctor bounced out of his study. Pat's nose wrinkled at the aroma of whisky. One thing, he conceded mentally, it was good whisky.

"Kin I hev a word with Telford?" inquired the sheriff.

"It's not advisable," fumed the medico. "The man's weak, still in the danger zone."

"Jest a word or two," persisted Pat. "It's mighty important."

"Well, under the circumstances, yes," conceded the little doctor. "But no excitement! The patient must not be excited or upset."

He ushered the sheriff into a back bedroom. In one corner, Telford's gaunt frame was stretched on a cot. In another, the motionless shape of Montgomery lumped beneath blankets.

Pat inclined his head toward the unconscious form. "Still alive, eh?"

"Alive, but little more," admitted Trimble. He indicated the photographer. "Two minutes—and no more!"

Telford watched Pat's approach with incurious eyes. The sheriff sank upon a chair beside the bed.

"On the mend, eh?" The wounded man inclined his head slightly.

"Any idea who plugged yuh?"

Telford's head moved slowly from side to side.

"See him?"

"It was dark," whispered the patient faintly.

"Was it Montgomery?" Pat nodded towards the still form across the room.

The photographer's head moved in quick negation.

"Shore?"

The other nodded.

"Any idea why yuh were cut down?"

Again a negative reply.

"You know Montgomery or Markham?"

"No!"

Know who spread blackleg?"

Telford shook his head.

The pressure of Doc Trimble's hand on his shoulder warned Pat the brief question was at an end.

He rose, followed the doctor from the room.

"Well, did you learn anything?" inquired Trimble crisply, as he closed the door behind them.

"Nary a thing," admitted Pat. "Whar's Montgomery's duds?"

The doctor opened a closet door and indicated a pile of clothing on a shelf.

Pat yanked it out upon the floor—a crumpled tweed suit, dusty shoes, blood-soaked shirt and underclothes, a bulging money belt.

He hefted the belt with his hand. "The jasper shore totes dinero aplenty."

From a pocket of the suit he abstracted a small notebook and a check book. Pat flicked the pages of the notebook. It carried a record of the land the Englishman had bought, with amounts paid. Next he examined the check book. Few of the checks had been used, apparently payments had been in gold. The pockets of the pants contained nothing beyond loose coin, matches and a tobacco pouch.

Pat bundled the clothes together and piled them on the shelf again. "Reckon I'll hold these f'r evidence," he told the doctor, indicating the money belt, notebook and check book.

"Certainly, if you wish to assume the responsibility," barked Trimble.

HEADING FOR his hotel room through the gathering darkness, the sheriff mulled over the results of his visit. Telford was either lying, or had no connection with the gang. If he was no more than he claimed to be, why had he been shot? And why did he carry a derringer identical with Montgomery's? Where were the rest of the Englishman's papers? He must have received receipts for his payments, contracts of sale, deeds. There was no trace of them, either in his room or among his belongings. Neither he nor Markham had done business wtih the Cattlemen's Bank, so they were not deposited in its vault.

When Peter Telford was in a fit condition to be questioned further, Pat decided there were many more things he would like to know. If Chauncey Montgomery, too, clung to life, and could be induced to open his lips, Pat was convinced he could reveal plenty.

WITH SALLY'S letter on his mind, there was no peace for Pat Stevens that evening. Now that he had steeled himself to defy the unknown gang who held Sally, memories of his grey-eyed wife crowded his mind. For an hour he wandered around the stuffy hotel room, speculating, sober-eyed, upon her fate. Resolution weakened as anxiety bit into him. Yet what guarantee had he that the lobos who held her would keep their word if he did quit? He asked himself again and again. By the yellow light of the oil lamp he restudied Sally's letter. With each reading the conviction grew that this was not the Sally he knew and loved. His Sally would never beg him tearfully to throw in his hand to save herself. Or spread her distress on paper. She was cast in a different mold. Either she was completely unnerved or there was a purpose behind the lamenting lines.

Driven by restlessness, Pat wandered down to the livery barn, threw his kak on the claybank and hit for

Sam's spread. Action, any kind of action, brought a measure of relief to his troubled mind.

Tranquillity reigned in the living room of Sam's ranch house. Kitty, his wife sat in a rocker, sewing. Sam and Dock occupied the couch, the boy's eager eyes following the squat rider's dexterous fingers as he plaited a rawhide quirt. The homely scene brought a quick pang to Pat's heart when he entered—how many happy evenings, just like this, had he spent with Sally and his boy!

Sam's dark eyes flicked over the sheriff's drawn face.

"Rest yore laigs, Pat," he grunted. "Reckon I kin guess what's on yore mind. Anything fresh?"

"Nary a word," returned his pard, sinking heavily into a chair. "Sam!" He jerked the letter from his pants pocket and spread it upon his knees. "They's something wrong with this—and I jest cain't figger what. What was thet you said about a meaning between the lines?"

Sam dropped the unfinished quirt and stretched out his hand for the much-fingered letter. "I ain't rightly sure, but thet don't sound like Sally. Hey Dock!" He extended the letter towards the boy. "Take thet note of yore ma's tuh yore room and read it careful. Yore paw reckons they's a code there somewhere. Mebbe a bright young spark like you kin hit it."

"Yore wastin' the kid's time," said Pat, when Dock slipped out of the room, the creased sheet fluttering in his fingers.

"Mebbe," returned the squat man philosophically, "but it don't hurt none tuh try. When I was a button, we kids was crazy over secret codes and sich, and I guess yonkers ain't changed none. Dock's as smart as a whip."

The two men smoked in silence, while Sam's wife plied her busy needles. Outside, in the pasture, a pony nickered. The distant bellow of a cow drifted across the prairie.

The quiet was shattered by Dock. Eyes aglow, he burst into the room, waving the letter in one hand and a sheet of paper in the other. "I got it, Dad!" he shouted. "It was a cinch!"

Both men jumped to their feet, infected by the boy's excitement.

"What did yuh git, Dock?" Pat scanned the sheet his son thrust into his hand.

"The code! Say, ain't Ma smart!" Pride rang in the boy's clear tones.

PAT STARED at the sheet. Dock had rewritten his mother's letter, starting each sentence on a fresh line. He read:

Dearest:

I am safe and sound.
R obbers have made me a prisoner.
O h, I do so long to be home again, but that depends upon you, sweetheart.
B ecause they threaten me with a fate worse than death, if you do not hand in your star and leave the Valley.
B ut if you do, they promise to release me unharmed.
E very day I think of you and Dock and the happy days that seem so far away.
R egardless of the consequences, I beg and pray that you do as I ask.
S end in your resignation and go to Pueblo, I will join you there.

R emember the happiness we once had?
O h, how I wish I was free again.
O r, I had you and Dock with me.
S end in your resignation quickly please, dear.
T hink of your heart-broken wife,

Sally.

"Robbers Roost!" breathed the sheriff. " 'Member Sam, thet chunk of hell, whar you and Ezra was hogswingled outta yore dinero?"

"Do I remember!" growled Sam feelingly. "How did yuh git it, Dock?"

"Easy as falling off a hawse!" declared the boy. "I just took the first

letter in each sentence. See!" He took the sheet from his father and gave it to the sharp-eyed Sam. "They spell Robbers Roost."

"So thet's why it reads like a tangled rope," observed Pat. "They watched her write it and she hadda think fast tuh string it together as she went along. Wal, Sally fooled 'em!" His eyes shone and his voice resounded with renewed hope.

"Nice work, Dock!" He grasped his son's shoulder affectionately. "Yore the smartest yonker in Powder Valley, bar none. Wal, Sam, we'll gather up Ezra and ride at sun-up. And this time I gamble it won't be a blind trail."

17

NO FRONTIER settlement better merited the designation "hell town" than Robbers' Roost. It was probably the only spot from the Canadian line to the Mexican border where there was actually no law, or pretense of law.

Where the three states of Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico met, by some unexplained error a small triangular patch of mountain country was left outside the boundaries of each. It was nameless, officially nonexistent. No state's sheriff could cross its boundary to make an arrest. It had no courts, and no prisons. In this renegade "No Man's Land" there was but one law—the survival of the fittest; one arbitrator—King Colt.

Here, like a skunkweed, sprang up Robbers' Roost—a motley collection of shacks and adobes where wanted men could booze, gamble, kill and be killed—beyond the law. In this outlaw town gamblers, harpies, criminals of every hue, held devil's carnival, and violent death attracted less attention than the dying flicker of a discarded match.

Such was Robbers' Roost, a festering sore on the mountains' bosom, when the three partners jogged in, sweat-plastered after a grueling ride through the barren hills.

"It ain't changed a mite," pronounced Pat, squinting against the rays of the dying sun. His eyes ran over a jam of crude wooden shanties of all shapes and sizes, supporting each other like a tight wedged row of drunken men, that crowded each side of the narrow, crooked lane that served as street. Rude signs, nailed upon unpainted fronts, labeled the warped structures. Memory stirred as he read, Kelly's Dance Hall, Blackjack Saloon, Tucson Eatery, Cosmopolitan, Bucket of Blood. There were a score of joints, even a two-storied frame hotel, faced by a wooden awning and a long bench, which a slug-scarred hanging sign proclaimed was the Lone Eagle Saloon and Rooms.

A picturesque throng drifted along the uneven plankwalks—whiskered desperados, with tied-down guns; red-sashed Mexicans with huge black sombreros; somber grey-shirted gunmen, alert as questing cats; even an occasional blanketed Indian, with unfathomable eyes and dignified mien.

From the fronts of saloons and dance halls, garish light reflected upon the sweepings of seven states. Guitars strummed and pianos tinkled, while rouged women peered out, grimacing and beckoning.

A scattering of ponies drooped at the hitch rails. Back of the "business" center, shacks mushroomed over the rock-littered hillside.

Pat pulled over towards the Lone Eagle Saloon and stiffly piled out of leather at the long pine pole that served as hitch rail. Beating the dust from his Stetson, he pushed inside the saloon, followed by Sam and Ezra. Men clustered like bees along the bar and sat in intent groups around tables. Cards slithered silently, chips rattled, roulette wheels whirled.

A busy barkeep pushed bottle and glasses over the wet bar. Ezra swallowed gratefully and refilled his glass. "Good licker!" he grunted, downing another. "Wal, Pat, we're heah! What's the play?"

The sheriff sipped his drink and studied the variegated throng in the back-bar mirror. "Git us a room I reckon, then we kin figger."

Fifteen minutes later the three sat in a planked bedroom above the sal-

oon. Pat occupied the only chair; his partners held down the bed. Through the open window they listened to the voice of Robbers' Roost, an incessant cascade of sound—the shouting of drunken men, the shrill laughter of women, the stringy tinkle of a piano. Then a quick scream, the thunder of a gun, twice repeated. Through it all, like the rumble of surf upon a rugged shore, the mumble of many men in the saloon below.

"Wal!" commented Sam dolefully. "We're heah! But whar's Sally?"

"We'll find out, afore we quit, ef it takes a life-time," promised Pat, frowning at his cigarette. "Let's drift around awhle. And lay off them guns! We're heah tuh dig out Sally, not f'r plain or fancy shootin'."

AT THE end of the crooked street was a livery barn, run by a fat Mexican. The trio watered and grained their ponies. Sam tolled the greasy Mex into the office while Pat checked the brands of ponies stamping in the stalls, with a stable lamp, on the slender chance of picking up a clue.

Then they mingled with the throng on the plankwalks, drifted from saloon to saloon, took in the gambling joints and dance halls, eyes and ears alert.

In the Blackjack Saloon the intent quiet of the gambling tables was broken by a shouted curse. Pat swung round from the bar—to see a brawny, pock-faced hombre scrape back his chair with an oath and grab for his gun. A cold-eyed gambler sitting opposite, clad in sober black, with pasty features and waxed mustache, jerked out a stub-barreled gun and fired in one swift motion. The big man stumbled, grabbed a chair back with one hand for support, pulled his gun with the other. Again the gambler's gun barked. He crashed down. Two swampers grabbed his still quivering form and dragged him across the sawdust, threading through the crowded tables. They disappeared through a door at the rear of the saloon. Card play continued, unheeding.

Ezra, growling, surged forward. Pat gripped the redhead's arm. "Keep outta trouble!" he rasped.

"This burg's as salty as ever it was," murmured Sam sardonically. "A killin' means a mite less than nuthin'. I'd shore enjoy bustin' thet frozen-faced tinhorn gambler on the conk."

"Let's drift!" urged Pat, scenting trouble. He didn't breathe easily until he steered them outside, beneath the stars.

IT WAS THE third sundown after their arrival in Robbers' Roost and the men from Powder Valley were no further ahead than when they first rode into the renegade lair. Pat stared out of the window of the bare hotel room with knitted brow. The thought that Sally was held a prisoner in this hell town, perhaps not a stone's throw distant, was maddening. Yet he could do no more than drift around, hoping desperately to uncover some sign that might lead him to her. In any other town he could have sought the aid of a fellow lawman, familiar with its inhabitants. Here, there was no law, save that of the wolf pack. The strong survived, the weak went to the wall. Every man distrusted his fellow. Crime was commonplace. The belligerent Ezra, too, was a problem. Lounging around saloons from sun-up to sunset meant plenty drinking, and Ezra —with a few snorts beneath his belt —was eager to tackle his weight in wildcats. Already, the sheriff had levered him out of several scrapes. Right now, well liquored, he was stretched on the bed, snoring like a buzz-saw. Sam hunkered against the wall, scowling at the dirty floor boards.

Pat turned. "Keep him corraled!" he cautioned, indicating Ezra's bulky form. "I'm agoin' tuh circulate awhile." Sam nodded.

The sheriff drifted along the plankwalk, pushed through the batwings of the Blackjack Saloon, the toughest joint on the crooked street. He nursed a drink. From habit, his eyes roamed over the men lined up on either side, reflected in the mirror back of the bartender. Of a sudden

his interest quickened. His gaze focused upon a weedy man in dirty grey shirt and overalls. "Baldy Benton!" he murured. "What in thunder's thet little squirt doing around heah?" Then the nester fished a fat silver watch out of his overall pocket. From it dangled a broken chain. Pat's muscles tensed. Unconsciously, he felt a short length of watch chain in the pocket of his dangling vest. He slowly built a smoke, narrowly watching the runty nester.

Baldy ratholed a couple of stiff pegs, dropped a dollar on the bar and moved towards the batwings. Pat dogged him close.

Outside, on the darkened plankwalk, the sheriff stepped up to the nester's side. "Howdy, Baldy!" he greeted with forced geniality.

As though hit by a bullet, the nester jerked to a stop. His head swiveled in quick panic. Pat read fear in his small eyes. With a squeal, he dove for the darkness of an alley.

In three strides the long-legged sheriff was atop of him. His fingers fastened on the fleeing nester's collar. He yanked the struggling Baldy to a halt, jammed him against a saloon front.

"Howcome yore scared, Baldy?" purred Pat.

The nester moistened his lips, eyes slanting around, like a cornered rat. "I ain't scared," he gulped.

"Hang out around heah?"

Baldy nodded sulkily.

"Ain't thet jest dandy! Mebbe you could help me. Let's take a walk!" Pat's fingers sank into the nester's shoulder. The other pulled back, struggling to break free.

"You cain't herd me around," he squealed. "There ain't no law in Robbers' Roost. Lemme go!"

"Quit squawkin'!" rasped Pat, propelling his squirming prisoner past the indifferent loiterers on the plankwalk. "Or I'm liable tuh dent yore conk, pronto."

They left the flaming saloons and blaring dance halls behind. Darkness crowded in. The plankwalk ended. Ahead curved the wagon road. Pat's grip tightened on the nester's shoulder. He angled up the hillside. Around them, rock strata protruded from the slope like sharks' fins, and squat brush patched the eroding soil. Behind, rumbled the night life of Robbers' Roost.

In silence, the pair tramped up the crumbling slope. Pat stopped by the twisted trunk of a gaunt juniper. "Wal," he drawled, glancing around the shadowed hillside. "I reckon this is a nice, quiet spot f'r a killin'—or mebbe jest a talk."

"You ain't got nuthin' on me," whined Baldy. He shrank against the tree trunk, eyes fastened fearfully on the sheriff's tall figure.

"Mebbe I ain't," agreed Pat. "Mebbe I got you all wrong. Lemme see yore ticker!"

DUBIOUSLY, THE nester pulled out his watch. Pat struck a match—eyed the chain. Then dropped the watch in his own vest pocket.

"So you was in on it!" he growled. "Ef you don't loosen up, you damned little weasel, I'll bore yuh. Now lissen! My wife was snatched close tuh Rattlesnake Gulch. You was squattin' in the Gulch. She's held in Robber's Roost, and yore in Robber's Roost. Ain't thet funny?"

"I don't know nuthin'—"

"Can the chatter, yore tongue's crooked!" Pat's voice was edged. He slid his gun out of leather. "I'll giv' yuh two minutes, Baldy. Take me tuh the hideaway or take a slug. I'd jest as soon plug yuh." The hammer clicked back.

"One minute!" Pat's voice was toneless.

Quiet enveloped the two shadowy forms, save for Baldy's quick panting. Then, as slick as a cat, the nester whirled and slid behind the tree. Covered by the trunk, he scrambled desperately up the slope, heading for the cover of a patch of brush above.

Like an enraged mastiff, Pat was after him. The sheriff reached out, grabbed a leg, hauled the cursing, clawing man back to the juniper, pinned him against the trunk with the cold muzzle of the six-gun against his scrawny throat.

"Time's up!" he rasped.

"F'r Gawd's sake, quit!" sobbed Baldy. "They made me take a hand, Beck and thet 'breed. They'd a kilt me ef I pulled out."

"Whar's Sally?"

"In the 'breed's shack, up the canyon."

"She awright?"

"We ain't harmed a hair on her head. Gawd's truth, Sheriff!" panted the nester.

"Who's holdin' her?"

"The 'breed and Cactus Joe."

"Let's go git her!" Pat shoved the shaking nester before him down the hillside.

The roar of Robbers' Roost died as Baldy moved on dragging feet up the trail that wound through pinon towards the head of the gulch. Behind him, like a figure of avenging fate, stalked the silent sheriff.

In the moonlight the great peaks fingered up towards the heavens. A cooling breeze soughed softly through the pinon. Stars splattered the purple bowl above like thronging fireflies. Nothing disturbed the serenity of the night. There was no sound save the steady crunch, crunch, crunch of the plodding men's boots on the gritty trail.

Ahead, beneath the tall trees, a small square window glowed bright against the indistinct outline of a shack.

Baldy's pace slackened. He stopped, pointed. "There y'are!" he quavered.

"Keep agoin'," growled Pat.

"Lemme beat it!" begged the nester. "The 'breed u'll plug me, shore."

Pat's gun nuzzled his neck, prodded him forward.

Then the light flicked out.

Baldy pushed back against the gun. "I darsent!" he croaked. "Lemme go!"

Grimly intent upon the dim shape of the building not twenty paces ahead, Pat grabbed the nester, half pushed, half carried him forward.

Holding the twisting form before him, he approached the dim, silent shack. Reaching over Baldy's shoulder, he rapped sharply on the door.

It flung open.

"Don't shoot—it's me!" screamed Baldy.

The darkness within was split by a crimson flash. Pat caught sight of a swarthy face, with high cheekbones, behind the roaring gun. He felt the nester's body slump under the impact of a slug.

18

PAT THREW THE sagging form of the nester to one side and dove through the doorway, arms thrust forward as he grabbed for the gunman's legs. As his body hurtled forward and down, the thunder of another explosion deafened him and the hot scorch of burning powder seared his forehead.

Then, in the darkness, he hit the 'breed's legs and wrapped his arms around them. The sheriff felt the impact of a heavy body as the gunman toppled and sprawled atop his outstretched form. Twisting and kicking like a maddened steer, his opponent broke free. Pat wriggled clear, flung around again hurled himself upon the indistinct form of the 'breed. A clubbed gun chopped down blindly, scraped the sheriff's ear and smashed into his shoulder. He groped for his assailant's gun hand, fastened upon a muscular wrist and pinned it to the floor. His right hand sought the 'breed's throat.

Fingers hooked, the squirming 'breed raked Pat's cheek, feeling for his eyes, while his knees pumped up like pistons, ramming into the sheriff's groin. Pat pressed his face hard against the other's rough flannel shirt, to escape the scraping talons. At last he found the 'breed's throat—his sinewy fingers dug in.

Behind in the darkened room, the sheriff heard the shuffle of feet, the tinkle of a glass lamp globe.

The 'breed's breath was whistling through his windpipe. His muscles slackened. Pat momentarily eased his cramped fingers. With a convulsive wrench, the 'breed broke free, flung him sideways.

Again they locked, gasping and battling with silent ferocity; rolled over and over across the floor in a struggle

to the death, legs threshing and fists pounding. Their whirling bodies collided with the legs of the second man. Thrown headlong, he hit the planks with a thud that shook the flimsy walls. A lamp crashed to the floor and its globe shattered into a thousand fragments.

Clawing for each other's throats, the pair wedged up against a side wall. Pat was atop. In the melee, the 'breed had dropped his gun. A knee caught the sheriff in the stomach. With a gasp of agonized pain, he jerked free—hammered a clenched fist at the figure beneath him. It hit flesh—sharp teeth that lacerated his knuckles, Again and again,—right left, right, left—he ruthlessly pounded the 'breed's face with short jabs, the weight of his body behind every blow, felt the body beneath him slacken, grow limp and still.

Bleeding and breathless, Pat was taking no chances. There was yet another lobo to deal with in that darkened cabin. His hands found and fastened upon the 'breed's throat. Remorselessly he choked out what life yet remained in the tough body.

"Git the son Kerfoot?" Edged with caution, the husky tones of Cactus Joe's voice drooled through the dark. Pat rolled the 'breed's limp body over, bellied down behind it.

"Shore!" he drawled.

A blazing gun filled the confined room with thunder. The slug bored through the wooden siding above the sheriff's head. His own gun blared in reply.

From the opposite side of the room, Cactus Joe's iron again flared red. The 'breed's body jerked under the impact of lead. Pat's slug, in swift reply, clanged on the iron stove and hummed ceilingward.

For awhile, both men were silent, each waiting for sign or sound of his unseen opponent. Every faculty alert, the sheriff rested his gun arm on the 'breed's body, staring into the black pall that pressed upon his eyeballs. He visualized Cactus Joe crouched or lying somewhere in that pool of darkness, breathing softly, cocked gun gripped in his ready fist. From now on it was a battle of nerves.

Slowly, carefully, Pat slipped a cartridge out of the 'breed's belt, pitched it towards the further wall.

It dropped on the wooden floor with a clatter that seemed to fill the room, but Cactus gave no sign. Quiet settled, a silence so deep that Pat, stretched behind the 'breed's body, could hear the steady tick-tick-tick of the dead man's watch.

The open doorway made a greyish rectangle at the side of the room. Cactus, Pat decided, was behind the stove, to his left. With infinite care, he slid cartridge after cartridge from the 'breed's belt—four, five, six, seven. He gathered them in his left fist, right hand wrapped around the smooth butt of his leveled gun.

With a round-arm swing, he hurled the metal cylinders with all his strength in the direction of the stove. A quick exclamation of pain slipped from between Cactus' lips as the cartridge clanged against the stove and thudded on the opposite wall—one of the missiles had hit the mark.

Again a gun lanced red. Pat glimpsed a huddled form in the quick light of the stabbing flash. Three swift shots crashed as he emptied his gun. Lying prone, lips locked tight to stifle an urge to cough out the acrid air, heavy with powder fumes, he waited—the ominous silence pressing on his eardrums like a lead weight.

Then a deep agonized groan carried through the darkness. Gently, the sheriff eased his other gun out of leather, wormed over the body before him and snaked forward across the floor. Again that groan. The sheriff froze, seeking to locate the sound. Cactus might be hard hit—or he might be playing possum, crouched ready to deal out death.

Inch by inch, Pat edged forward. Again the moan, fainter and straight ahead. The sheriff triggered, pouring lead into the dark. No gun blared in reply.

THE SHERIFF pushed up off the floor, rose to his feet crouched and advanced, one questing hand outstretched, gun gripped in the other. Feeling blindly forward, his fingers

touched the smooth leather of a boot. Taut, he ran his hand up to the boot top, lifted the leg and let it fall. It dropped flabbily. Cautiously, he inched closer, ran his hand over a slack body. It came away wet and sticky with blood.

With grim satisfaction, Pat straightened and holstered his iron. His Stetson lay in the dim light of the doorway. He plucked a match from the band, scraped it on the floor and eyed his opponent by the faint, flickering light. One glance at the gaping mouth and relaxed features of Cactus Joe was enough —he would never shoot again.

The sheriff picked up the stable lamp that lay with smashed chimney on the floor, touched the dying match to the bare wick.

Eagerly, he strode to a door that closed off the other half of the shack. He threw it open—and ran forward with a choked cry of recognition.

Sally lay on a rough bunk, arms and legs bound with rawhide thongs, a bandana wrapped around her mouth.

A few quick slashes with his Barlow knife and the lashings fell off. Sally jerked down the bandana and her arms enveloped her husband's neck.

"Oh! Pat!" she sobbed. Tears stood in the sheriff's grey eyes as he pressed her quivering form tight against his body.

After awhile, Sally's grip loosened. She wiped her eyes with the bandana that still hung around her neck, and smiled wanly.

"I knew it was you," she said softly, dabbing the blood from his scratched face. She shuddered. "That last half hour seemed an eternity, every shot struck me in the heart. I thought they'd kill you. Is Dock—all right?"

"Fine," chuckled Pat. "Smart fellow, Dock. The kid broke yore code.

"Say yore the smartest gal in Colorado." The sheriff's arms still enveloped Sally's slim form, as though he were afraid she might even now be spirited away. "Gee, won't Sam and Ezra be sore when they find they missed this fracas!"

"Are they here too?" asked Sally in surprise.

"Shore, down in Robber's Roost. Reckon yuh ain't been tuh town?"

She shook her head.

"Wal, you ain't missed much." He hesitated. "Them jaspers treat you good?"

"Far better than I expected. Beck, thet man with the burning eyes, scared me but he went away."

"How was the chuck?"

Sally laughed, a lilting laugh that made sweet music in Pat's ears. "I was cook! And they really appreciated my cooking."

"Wal," grunted the sheriff, "I need a cook, too. Let's git outta this stinking hole!"

Swinging the lamp, he led the way into the outer room. Sally recoiled at sight of the two sprawled forms.

"Dead?" she whispered.

"Yep," replied Pat laconically, "and another outside."

She clasped his hand tightly and hurried towards the door.

GHOSTLY, THE SLIM pinons thrust upwards into the night, their interlaced branches throwing fretted shadows over the ground.

Pat glanced around, seeking Baldy's body. "Dammit!" he ejaculated, "the skunk's vamoosed."

A pony nickered behind the shack and hooves thudded.

"Stick around a mite," directed the sheriff. "I reckon we kin use thet saddle stock." He strode towards the rear of the building.

"Pat Stevens!" declared Sally firmly, tagging close behind him. "You're not going out of my sight!" Several ponies were chousing around a small pole corral.

Pat suddenly checked, swung round and gripped Sally's arm.

"Lay low!" he whispered urgently, "trouble!"

Under pressure of his arm, she sank to the ground.

Once again fingering his six-gun, Pat cat-toed forward.

Swinging a rope in the corral was Baldy. Unconscious of the sheriff's prescence, he made a cast in the

gloom, and missed.

Swearing profusely, the nester gathered up his rope, while the frightened ponies bunched. Baldy's bandana was wrapped around his head.

The coiled rope dropped from his nerveless fingers and his arms shot skyward as Pat's gun pressed against his backbone.

"Figgered you was cold meat," said Pat, softly. "Mebbe I should make sure."

The nester stiffened. "I just woke up!" he whined. "The 'breed's pill musta bounced off my bean. Figgered I'd better git out and vamoose. I ain't done no harm!"

Pat slipped Baldy's gun out of the holster and pitched it over the corral rail.

"You saddle three broncs," he directed. "Try tuh run a sandy over me and I'll shore do a better job than the 'breed."

BENEATH A STARRY canopy, five riders left the glare and garishness of Robbers' Roost behind them and clip-clopped along the wagon road that coiled around the flanks of the gaunt hills.

"Why did those men want you to leave Powder Valley?" asked Sally suddenly.

"So the blackleg gang could take over," grunted Pat.

"The blackleg gang?" Her voice was puzzled.

"Yep." The sheriff told of the ravaged valley and the coming of the railroad.

"Oh!" breathed Sally. "Those poor ranchers! It's a shame. Who's the leader of these criminals, that horrible Beck person?"

"Beck ain't got the brains, and he's in the hoosegow right now. Looks like the limey knows plenty. I ain't got it all straightened out in my mind yet," confessed her husband. "But," he promised grimly, "Beck u'll talk when I get tuh workin' on the sidewinder."

Dawn dimed the stars and dissolved the grey shadows when the five trail-stained riders slid off their gaunt ponies at Sam's spread and aroused an incredulous Kitty and hilarious Dock.

After a talk-fest over a hastily prepared meal, Sam's wife bundled Sally, pale with fatigue, off to bed. Ezra hit for home, while Pat and Sam stretched out on couches. Baldy was locked in the barn.

In early afternoon, at Sally's insistence, the sheriff convoyed his wife and son back to the ranch. "These horrible blackleggers are not going to scare me away from home," she declared, in reply to Pat's vigorous protest. "Besides," she glanced proudly at Dock's eager face. "I have a man to guard me when you're away."

Next morning, a revitalized Pat rode into town, eager for action. Beside him rode the disconsolate nester. Wes Langard, grizzled old Wells Fargo shotgun guard, who acted as relief jailor, held down the office.

"Time yuh was back," he grunted. "I gotta stiff on my hands."

"Limey check out?"

"Nope, doc sez thet jasper is tougher'n rawhide. He's comin' along in good shape. Beck got his'n."

Pat snapped to attention. "Hell, warn't Beck behind the bars?"

"Yep—but they got him jest the same."

"Who's 'they?'"

Wes expectorated. "You tell me! He was stiffer'n a poker when I opened up this a.m."

Together, the men crossed the patch of ground that lay between office and the adobe jail. Wes eased open the heavy door, locked Baldy in a cell.

CHARLIE, huddled on his bunk, eyed them indifferently. Beck's body lay beneath the window of his cell. Hardened as he was to violent death, the sheriff's stomach heaved as he caught sight of the remnants of the ex-convict's face.

Langard kicked open the barred door of the cell and indicated the small aperture that served as window, high up on the wall. "Looks like Beck hauled hisself up tuh the winder," he commented, "and some-

one said 'Hello' with a scatter gun. Wal, he did a good job!"

Pat turned and addressed the cook through the bars.

"You hear anything, Charlie!"

"I'd be stone-deaf ef I didn't, replied the cook tonelessly, "and yuh cain't hang this on me, Pat! Some time last night I heard a feller callin' 'Beck!' outside. Like Wes sez, the galoot stretches up, grabs the edge of the winder and pulls hisself up. Then the gun spoke and he come down—faster'n he went up."

"Would yuh know the voice agen?"

"Mebbe," replied Charlie cautiously.

"Somebody was scared he'd squawk," commented Pat thoughtfully. "Wal, I've still got Baldy." Quickly his mind ran over the possibilities. Ezra had left Sam's place the morning before. That meant the news of Sally's release and the killing of her guards would reach town before nightfall. News travels quickly on the range. Beck's killer feared the ex-convict, doomed to life imprisonment by exposure of his part in the abduction, might talk. And he had closed the bitter-faced man's mouth—for ever. It was plain the assassin was a cold-blooded killer who would stop at nothing And that he still lurked around Dutch Springs. Who was it? Was the shadowy Chief responsible, or one of his tools? Pat's brow clouded as he followed Langard's spare figure back to the office.

Genial Judge Bemis and the alert-eyed Justus Sharman broke in upon the two lawman as they mulled over the affair. The Judge grasped Pat's hand and shook it warmly. "Congratulations! I just heard of your escapade in Robbers' Roost. And Sally is back safe and sound! Wonderful news! Wonderful!"

"Allow me to add my congratulations," smiled Sharman. "You certainly cleared out that nest of rattlesnakes. And now I hear my client"—he nodded towards the jail—"has crossed the Stygian ferry. Remember!" he turned to the judge, "I thought I heard the blast of a gun when we were playing cribbage last night."

Judge Bemis nodded soberly. "I imagine it was the poor fellow's coup de grace."

19

"BY THE WAY," Sharman pulled a long envelope from the inside pocket of his business suit. "We are overlooking the major purpose of our visit." He abstracted a document from the envelope and laid it on the desk before Pat. "The Judge and I thought you had better see this before it is placed on record."

The sheriff unfolded the stiff legal sheet and his eyes opened wide as he digested the contents "Say!" he ejaculated, "this is a deed tuh Pat Fraser's Lazy F."

"Forwarded to me from the buyer in Chicago for recording," said Sharman. "Apparently Mr. Fraser sold out a week before his death."

Eyes puzzled, Pat ran through the deed. It was apparently in order, duly signed by the late Pat Fraser.

"Who handled the deal?" he queried. "Markham?"

Sharman shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "You know just as much as I do. I imagine Fraser sold out to either Markham or the Englishman, Montgomery. Those two gentlemen were apparently determined to acquire the entire Valley."

"Kin I hold this awhile?" asked the sheriff. "The deal stinks worse'n a polecat."

The lawyer glanced at Judge Bemis. "My instructions were to record it," he demurred, "but if the Judge concurs, a slight delay should be of no great consequence."

"I can understand Pat's perturbation," said the Judge. "Fraser was the sworn enemy of the land buyers. In fact, he instigated the attempt to lynch them, yet this deed proves he sold out a week before. It's mystifying!"

Sharman smiled. "Who can comprehend the motives of men? In this case I would say that Fraser con-

cealed the transaction because he had so widely advertised his intention to hold on to his land. A man of his type would never admit an error of judgment. Well, sheriff, take good care of the deed, I'm responsible for its safekeeping."

Left alone, Pat studied the document that transferred the vast Lazy F holdings to a stranger in faraway Chicago. Despite the lawyer's summing up of Fraser's character, the sheriff was unconvinced. One thing was plain—either the deed was a forgery, or his estimate of the old cowman's character was miles off the target. Were it not for the evidence staring him in the face, he would have sworn that Fraser's action was impossible.

Throughout, the cowman had been the sworn enemy of the Powder Valley land buyers. He refused to sell an acre, threw down on Montgomery, and did his best to lynch the pair of them. Yet here was evidence in black and white that he had sold out a week before he tried to hang them ...and had been knifed himself.

Pat slid open a desk drawer and thumbed through Montgomery's notebook. The Lazy F transaction was not on the list of sales. Markham's papers had disappeared, so a check-up was impossible there. However, there was one man who could identify Bill Fraser's signature—Jim McDonald spent his time pottering around a little ranch a mile north of town, where he raised chickens and ran a few cows.

Pat found the old cashier in the barn. Overalled and hatless, he was smearing creosote on the legs of a bawling calf, badly wirecut.

"Lo, Jim," greeted the sheriff. "You know Bill Fraser's moniker?"

"I reckon so," admitted the veteran cashier, releasing the calf, after a final dab. "Cashed the old moseyhorn's checks for twenty years or more."

"Take a gander at this." Pat smoothed out the crackling paper and extended the deed.

McDonald wiped off his hands on his overalls, took the document and eyed the signature.

"That's Bill's!" His tone was decisive.

"Shore?"

"I'll swear to it."

"Afore a judge?"

"Before ten judges."

"Wal, I reckon that settles it," said Pat reluctantly. He returned the deed to his pocket. "Be seein' yuh!"

Jogging back to town, he mulled Bill Fraser's unsuspected sellout over in his mind. Despite the evidence, he still could not accept it as a fact, it just didn't square with the old cowman's character. Again he yanked out the much thumbed document and eyed Fraser's bold, sprawling signature—in clear bluish ink.

An idea struck him. Outside the General Merchandise Store he dismounted, entered the big, rambling store and strode down a broad aisle between shelves stacked with every variety of merchandise, from delousers to dress lengths. Tod Gleeson pored over his ledgers in a small office in the rear of the store, making notes on a pad. "Sixty-five thousand dollars on the books," he announced, with a weary smile, "and not a dollar collectible. That's what blackleg has done for me."

"Reckon we're all in the same boat," said Pat. "Now, tell me something, Tod. When did yore last shipment of ink reach Dutch Springs?"

THAT AFTERNOON, the three partners gathered in the leanto office. The door was closed and Pat held forth. "You guys know why Beck was blasted—he knew too much. Some snake-blooded jasper figgered he'd spill his guts. Wal, we got another canary in the cage—Baldy. Chances are he'll sing. What's the answer?"

"He's due tuh buck out, pronto," snapped Sam.

"You said it! This bushwhacking son cain't afford tuh let Baldy live, f'r fear he'll squawk. And he's gotta blow out thet little weasel's lamp quick. Most likely t'night. Correct?"

"Right on the nose!" agreed Sam.

"Wal, he's our buzzard bait, and

right temptin' bait, too. I'm gamblin' the killer curls him up afore sunrise —ef he gits half a chance. So oil up them six-guns and snatch some shut-eye, because yore keepin' cases on the hoosegow from midnight on. This is whar we bust the Powder Valley gang wide open. And I want thet bushwhackin' gent alive. He's due tuh sing—aplenty."

At midnight, Wes Langard went off duty. Pat lit a stable lamp and walked over to the adobe jail. Charlie, the Lazy F cook, was rolled up in his blanket, fast asleep. Baldy jerked up in his bunk at the rasp of the lock on the outside door, and blinked into the light of the lantern.

"See them winders?" said Pat, indicating the row of small, square apertures high along the rough wall. "Keep away from them — they're p'ison. They's a guy packin' a slug f'r you."

The bald-headed nester jumped for the cell door and rattled it frantically, terror in his small eyes. "Lemme out!" he screeched. "You ain't got nuthin' on me!"

"Nuthin' but kidnappin'," said the sheriff grimly. "Baldy, yuhr due tuh plait hair bridles f'r a long, long time—ef yuhr lucky enough tuh see sun-up. So-long!"

Leaving the panic-stricken nester staring fearfully between the bars, he slammed the heavy outer door shut and locked it carefully.

The night was dark. Drifting clouds obscured the moon and patched the heavens, blacking out all but a few blinking stars. Quiet enveloped Dutch Springs, broken only by a yapping dog and the loud voices of a few belated and befuddled patrons of The Gold Eagle.

Pat stood by the jail door, peering into the obscurity of the waste land around. On this night, of all nights, he would have given a hundred dollars for a full moon and clear sky. The trap was set, but, in the darkness, there was a chance the rat would escape.

He headed for the office and set the lamp on the desk. Sam and Ezra were engaged in one of their interminable wrangles.

"Pat!" rumbled the redhead. "Kin a hawg swim?"

"Not around Dutch Springs," chuckled the sheriff. "Except mebbe in a hawss trough."

"Not anywheres," declared Sam hotly. "Hawgs cain' swim. They cuts their throats. Swimmin' is hawg suicide. Only ignoramuses thinks otherwise. Why, I recollect—"

"Save it!" cut in Pat. "Stamp out them smokes, and let's go!"

The three filed out into the darkness. The sheriff posted Ezra in the shadow of the courthouse, looming above them like a dark cloud. Sam he placed in the rear of the jail. Then he hit for Main Street and drifted silently along under the canopy of the plankwalk.

TWO HOURS later the sheriff stepped briskly into the office. A disconsolate Ezra and scowling Sam glared at each other from opposite sides of the room.

Pat glanced from one to the other. There was a twinkle in his grey eyes. "Ain't you boys off post?" he inquired.

"Aw!" growled Sam. "We tangled our ropes."

"You tangled *yore* rope," roared Ez.

"Wal, leastways, the son skipped," admitted Sam lamely.

"Spill the beans!" invited Pat, sinking into the swivel chair and rolling a smoke.

"It's soon said," replied his squat pard morosely. "I lamped a gazaboo skulkin' towards the hoosegow, mebbe an hour after you left. Took after him and stepped in a badger hole. 'Most busted my laig. The son, threw a slug at me and faded." He frowned at the sheriff's lean features, creased in a grin. "Say, what's so danged funny about thet?"

"Nuthin', Sam, nuthin'!" declared Pat hastily. "You're shore one hell of a guard!"

"I smell shenigans!" grunted Sam suspiciously. "It warn't you?"

"Nope! But I lamped the gent. He shore hit f'r his hole in a hurry, after thet shot."

"Who in hell was it?" demanded

the pair eagerly, but the sheriff held up his hand. "I ain't talkin', boys, but I reckon we're jest about ready tuh clean up Powder Valley. You go hit the hay. Come sun-up you'll see action, aplenty."

20

BEFORE THE town was astir the following morning, Pat hit for his office a stack of flapjacks under his belt. This was the day towards which he had worked for weeks, the day on which the mysterious figure behind the Powder Valley blackleg gang would be exposed, and peace restored to the ravaged valley.

For awhile he sat in his swivel chair, eyes half closed, mulling over the events that had led to the solution of the problem. Peace fled when Sam and Ezra jingled in.

"Wal, we're all primed f'r action," barked Sam. "'Member what you promised last night?" He eyed the sheriff's relaxed figure and added, with a snort, "You look like a contented cow achewin' the cud."

"Ain't he a shore-nuff ripsnorter!" taunted the sheriff, with a grin. "totes a gun 'n everything! You crave action? Go git Sharman. Jest say the deed's a phoney. Thet'll bring him arunnin'."

"Now I know shootin's due," groaned the squat man. "Me, I'm alwus sent somewheres when the blue whistlers are due tuh fly. Ezra ain't lame, cain't he go fetch the lawyer?"

"Vamoose!" yelled Pat, "afore I clap yuh in the hoosegow f'r refusing to obey a regularly constituted officer of the law and incitin' mutiny in a sheriff's office. And don't come back without Sharman!"

Sam left, grumbling.

Pat turned to Ezra. "Keep yuhr gun on thet lawyer when he drifts in. Ef I figger right, thet jasper's hell on two legs."

Ezra grunted, set a chair against the rear wall and spread himself over it.

The minutes passed but no sign of Sam or Sharman. At length Pat rose uneasily and stared out of the door. Main Street was empty, save for swampers and clerks sweeping out and washing windows. Sam came into view, walking fast.

"Cain't find hair nor hide of the jasper," he grumbled, entering the office. "He ain't at his house and the office is locked."

"Dammit!" rapped out the sheriff. "He skipped! We gotta corral thet lobo—he's the hellion who beggared the valley."

"Justus Sharman!" ejaculated his two pards, in amazed chorus. "Yore loco!"

"Like hell I am. I got the son tuh rights last night. He knifed Fraser, blasted Beck and forged the deed tuh the Lazy F, and thet ain't all, not by a long shot. Now he's hightailin' while we're yammerin'. Le's go!"

SHARMAN'S sorrel was missing from its stall in the livery barn. "I asked f'r it," fumed Pat. "Shoulda grabbed the hairpin last night. Wal, he ain't got more'n four, five hours start and thet sorrel's no stayer. You hit f'r Hopewell Junction, Sam, and check on the trains. You, Ezra, head f'r Robbers' Roost. Saddle up! I'll go swear in a coupla posses tuh ride with yuh. We jest got tuh git Sharman."

Pat watched the two posses sweep out of town, north and south, with baffled anger in his grey eyes—anger at himself for carelessly allowing the quarry to slip through his fingers just as he was about to spring the trap. For awhile, he gazed after the dust streamers that floated lazily over Main Street, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

Sharman was smart, too smart to do the obvious thing. He'd figure on a posse. Likely he had gone to earth until the hue and cry died down. Where? Thought of Baldy's abandoned shack in Rattlesnake Gulch slipped into the sheriff's mind. What better spot for a fugitive to hide—shelter and water, in the rugged tangle of the Barrens. Pat turned and reentered the livery barn. Mebbe it

would turn out to be a blind trail, but, in the past, he had cashed in on his hunches.

The sun slid behind the tawny bulk of the Culebras when the sheriff's pony plowed through the fine dust of the barren valley that lay south of the Gulch. Pat had circled to stop at his ranch and warn Sally and Dock of the lobo loose somewhere on the range. The sheriff figured that Sharman would be too busy saving his own skin to make more trouble, but who could predict the actions of that cold-blooded killer?

Rugged and forbidding, the rocky portals of Rattlesnake Gulch were wreathed in shadow. Pat dismounted, tied his pony to a low-branching oak, unstrapped his spurs and hung them on the horn. Then he moved cautiously up the narrow trail that snaked through the chaparral into the gloomy depths of the gulch.

The scent of wood smoke drifted to his nostrils—and set his pulse racing. Someone had kindled a fire ahead.

The deep cleft of the gulch was already darkened, although the sky overhead was yet illumined by the sinking sun.

Gradually, the brush thinned. The sheriff's questing eyes picked out the outline of the nester's shack, shadowed against the cliff wall. Smoke curled from the stove pipe jutting through the roof. A small window made a square yellow patch against the gathering gloom.

Pat eased ahead, slipping from one patch of brush to another. He injuned up to the shack, slid quietly along its timbered side and darted a quick glance through the window.

Sharman was seated at the rude table, clad in riding breeches and tan shirt. His back was towards the sheriff. Before him, on the table, was a stack of documents. Leisurely, he scrutinized each one and set it aside. A coffee pot bubbled on the wood stove and a tin cup and small sack of sugar were set on the table's end.

Pat eased his gun out of leather and cat-toed to the door. By luck, it was ajar. In one quick motion he kicked it open and threw down on the lawyer.

At his sharp challenge, Sharman whirled—to face the pointing gun.

For a moment his dark eyes blazed, then, as quickly, he recovered his composure, relaxed and smiled amiably.

"You startled me, sheriff! Why the heroics? Surely you don't suspect me of criminal intentions?"

PAT PAID unspoken tribute to the lawyer's coolness. Sudden misgiving seized him. Had he made a colossal blunder? He stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

"Wal," he replied, still holding the gun on Sharman's relaxed form, "I figgered I was on the trail of the feller who knifed Fraser and salivated Beck—and I found you!"

Sharman laughed, roared until the tears stood in his eyes. He dabbed the moisture away with a white handkerchief.

"Well, sheriff," he gasped. "I've been called many things in the course of my legal career, but never a murderer. What on earth led you to make such a ridiculous error?"

Behind a poker face, Pat battled with doubt.

"Howcome yuh tuh ride up here?" he demanded.

The lawyer waved a slim hand over the table. "It may seem peculiar, my dear sheriff, but I revel in solitude, that's one reason why I left the crowded cities behind me and came west. I had a mess of tedious legal work to clean up. I thought of this lonely shack hidden in the Barrens, swept everything into a valise and rode up early this morning. Tomorrow will find me back in Dutch Springs, ready for the daily grind. For heaven's sake, holster that gun. I'm no criminal!"

Slowly, doubtfully, the sheriff dropped his iron back into leather, but his hand lingered above the protruding butt.

Sharman swept the documents to one side, rose briskly to his feet and lifted another tin cup from a hook. "Mrs. Benton must have been gifted with unusual foresight," he observed.

"She left all the essentials, table, chairs, cups, even an old mattress in the next room. Sit down and join me in a cup of coffee!"

Forehead wrinkled in perplexity, Pat stood silently, still fumbling with the butt of his gun. "You pack a hideaway?" he queried abruptly.

"Who doesn't?" laughed Sharman. His right hand slid into a back pants pocket, came out with a small derringer, with pearl butt plates.

Instinctively, Pat's gun leaped out of leather.

The lawyer chuckled, pitched the weapon on to a shelf. "Now are you satisfied?" He turned to the stove.

Pat smiled a little self-consciously, hooked one of the dilapidated chairs forward with his foot, and sat down. Beneath the table, he fumbled with his left-hand gun.

Sharman lifted the coffee pot, turned and set it on the table. Seating himself on the opposite side of the table, he poured two cups of the steaming liquid. "Now," he said crisply, "perhaps you will explain why you almost scared me out of my wits with that gun."

Pat smiled ruefully. "Reckon I'm a prize jackass," he acknowledged. "Guess these killin's got my goat. My wife, Sally, was snatched by Beck and his gang up here. I hit f'r the shack on a hunch and jest naturally figgered the gink inside was hidin' out. Reckon thet's all," he finished uncomfortably.

"All of which demonstrates the folly of jumping to conclusions," murmured Sharman, eyes sparkling with amusement. "Well, sheriff, I promise you it won't go any further. Even the best of men make mistakes."

Pat sipped his coffee in embarrassed silence.

The cabin was warm. The heat of the stove, combined with the hot coffee, brought beads of perspiration to the sheriff's forehead. He loosed his shirt at the neck, unstrapped his heavy gunbelt and dropped it on the table. Then he pushed back his chair and lazily built a cigarette.

"Stretch!" Pat's head jerked up at the snarled exclamation. His jaw dropped with amazement, the cigarette paper and crumbs of tobacco spilled as his arms slowly rose shoulder high.

Across the table he stared into Sharman's bleak eyes, pinpointed with derisive lights, behind a cocked gun the lawyer had snatched from the sheriff's holster.

THE URBANE Sharman was transformed—lips stretched taut against even white teeth, dark features drawn into tight lines of ferocity. Never before, decided Pat, had he seen a closer human resemblance to a wolf.

"Get up, you blundering fool!" rasped Sharman, "and stand back against the wall."

Pat mutely kicked away his chair and backed slowly, watching the big gun in the lawyer's fist.

Sharman settled comfortably in his chair. The hand tight-grasping the heavy .45 dropped to the table, but the barrel was still aligned on the sheriff's belt buckle.

"So you thought I was the killer!" Sharman laughed contemptuously. "Well, I am the killer. Heaven knows how a fumblebrain like you could blunder on to the right track. But you did...and signed your own death warrant."

He chuckled. "To think a jackass like you would dare to match wits with Duke Artengo! I'm out of your class, man. I'm no cheap rustler or petty horse thief. I boss the smartest gang that ever worked out of Chi. Markham was one of my boys, but he cracked, so I had to close his mouth. We beggared your dumb ranchers and bought their land for a few lousy dollars. When the railroad comes through we'll make a million. That bull-headed Fraser horned in once too often. I knifed him. That's my specialty, knifing, and forgery. And you thought you could outwit *me*, you...Colorado cop!" His cold voice dripped derision.

Pat licked his lips. "Howcome Beck got in on the deal?"

Artengo smiled, baring his white teeth. "Just to keep you busy, although I'm afraid I overrated you.

Pity he didn't slit the throat of your skirt. Well, I dealt him out—to keep his big mouth shut, and it's one less to cut in on the take." He dropped his bantering tone, his voice became sharp, brittle, "Well, Stevens, you know too much to live. Taste this pill!"

Artengo's knuckles whitened as his hand tightened on the gun butt. The trigger clicked mechanically—that was all.

Suspicion flaming in his eyes, Artengo quickly thumbed back the hammer, again pressed the trigger—another click.

Pat lowered his hands. "Still figger I ain't in yore class?" he inquired, with a grim smile.

Artengo's eyes darted up. With an oath he hurled the useless gun at the mocking sheriff, swung round and clawed for the derringer on the shelf behind him.

Pat ducked to avoid the hurtling weapon, flicked a gun out of his boot top. As he straightened, the iron circled up in a swift arc.

Artengo swung around, grasping the derringer. Pat's gun barked—the pseudo lawyer swayed back as a slug tore into his chest. The sheriff's gun bucked and roared as two more bullets traced a death pattern over the killer's heart. Artengo drooped forward across the table, the derringer slid out of his relaxed fingers and clattered to the floor. In an ever-widening pool, his life's blood spread over the faded oilcloth.

21

THERE WAS standing room only in the little leanto office behind the Courthouse — silvery-haired Judge Bemis; huge, red-thatched Ezra; short, alert Sam; grizzled Wes Langard, listened in absorbed silence to Pat's story. The sheriff's scratched desk was littered with deeds to the land Markham had filched from impoverished Powder Valley ranchers.

"He was a past master, thet Duke Artengo," said Pat reminiscently. "Had me buffaloed, 'til I unloaded a gun and give him a chance tuh use it. And he shore swallowed the bait! Like all crooks, he was slick, but not slick enough!"

"But Shar—er Artengo presented the most impeccable credentials." The tone of Judge Bemis' voice indicated he found it difficult to believe Pat's story.

"Forged!" returned the sheriff. "Did yuh ever check up on the fellers who wrote 'em?"

"It seemed so unnecessary," murmured the jurist, a little abashed.

"He figgered on thet!" chuckled Pat.

"Howcome you got wise tuh the galoot?" queried Sam.

The sheriff pondered, his mind running back. "Reckon it was when he dropped thet deed tuh the Lazy F on my desk— he used his left hand."

He wrote with his right," interjected the judge, "ambidextrous, I imagine."

"Wal, Bill Fraser was knifed by a left-hander. Thet set me thinking. I picked up some specks of glass in Bill's living room, day we was out tuh see the body. When I called on Sharman the next morning he looked like the frayed end of a misspent day—and his glasses was smashed. 'Member a chair was tipped over at Bill's place? Sharman tripped over it in the dark and busted his blickers. Thet set me on the right track, but there warn't no proof—real proof.

"The deed was a clear giveaway. It was signed with blue ink. Wal, it so happened thet the General Merchandise Store got in a fresh stock of ink a week afore Sharman brought the deed in. The old stock was dead black. There warn't no blue ink in the Valley at the time Bill was supposed tuh sign—thet put the bee on Sharman. And ef yuh still ain't satisfied, jedge," Pat reached down and held up a dusty riding boot, "heah's one of the son's boots. It fits the tracks below Markham's window like a pea fits a pod."

"Dear, dear!" sighed the kindly Bemis. "The mendacity of men!" A

thought struck him. "Just a minute, Pat, Sharman was playing cribbage in my home when Beck was shot. He heard the report!"

The sheriff smiled. "Jest an alibi, Jedge. Sharman said he heard a shot. Mebbe he did, the odds are he didn't. He blew Beck's map tuh mincemeat after he left yore place."

The judge was not one to relinquish his loyalties quickly. "But he did his utmost to halt the lynching!"

"Shore, tuh save Markham's neck. Did anyone see him around when the fat guy was shot? Nope! When Markham cracked, Sharman put him out of business—pronto."

"Incomprehensible!" murmured Bemis.

"Not with a million dollars at stake."

"Say, how about limey?" broke in Sam. "Reckon he's due tuh plait hair bridles from now on."

"Mebbe," agreed Pat thoughtfully, "and mebbe not. He don't fit, somehow. Whyinell would he bid up land agenst Markham?" The sheriff's current of thought suddenly changed. "Say, Jedge, how about them deeds?" He indicated the stack of documents he had brought back from the shack in Rattlesnake Gulch.

The jurist hesitated, cleared his throat.

"I was thinkin'," continued the sheriff persuasively, "ef they was burned up, accidental like, the ranchers could sell their land all over agen, tuh the railroad, f'r a fair price. They shore need the dinero, jedge!"

Bemis frowned. "Most irregular, criminal in fact. Of course, Pat, if such an accident should occur, evidence of sale would be entirely lost, since the deeds are not yet recorded."

WITHOUT a word, the sheriff gathered up the deeds, crossed the room and dropped them into the circular heating stove. Ezra leaned over and set a match to them. Judge Bemis gazed fixedly out of the window.

There was a timid tap at the door. Pat dropped the stove lid into place, hiding the flaming paper. "Come in!" he shouted.

The door slowly eased open and Baldy Benton's faded wife nervously stepped in. Impulsively, she stepped forward and clutched Pat's arm with toilworn fingers.

"You got my man penned up!" she burst out.

"Yep, Baldy's been keepin' bad company."

"He ain't bad, sheriff, only weak. Baldy's easy led."

Pat fingered his chin, gazing down into the woman's anxious eyes. What was there about the weak-kneed, sniveling nester that inspired such loyalty as this, he wondered.

"You wouldn't want him back," he inquired, "after he ducked out and left yuh tuh starve with the kids?"

Mrs. Benton sighed. "I don't know, sheriff. Baldy was a good man, once, before he took to drink. Back in Kansas you never saw a better husband nor father. Couldn't you give him just one more chance. He tried to help you."

Under a gun, thought Pat. Aloud, he said, "Howcome?"

"He told me he sent that message from Danville, but they took Mrs. Stevens away before you got there."

"So thet's who tolled us tuh Danville! Wal, we gathered in Beck." Pat met her troubled eyes.

"You shore got a heap of faith in thet doggoned maverick," he mused.

"He's my man!" she retorted, with quiet dignity.

"Wal, ma'am, Jedge Bemis sets right over there, suppose we put it up tuh him!"

He turned to the jurist. "You heard Mrs. Benton, Jedge. I reckon Baldy ain't got much more backbone than a rope. But mebbe now we've scared the lights outta him, he'll hit a straight trail."

"Perhaps justice would be served if we paroled him to Mrs. Benton's custody," suggested the judge.

"Go git Baldy, and loose Charlie." Pat tossed the jail keys to Sam. "Tell Charlie I'll see him in the Gold Eagle, later. He'll hit f'r there anyways, like a bee tuh the hive."

THE SARDONIC Sam returned with the shambling nester.

Baldy's eyes wandered around the crowded office, avoided his wife's gaze and sought the floor. Feet shuffling uneasily, he fidgeted by the desk.

"Benton!" intoned the Judge, in his most impressive courtroom manner. "You realize that the heinous crime of which you are accused carried a maximum sentence of twenty years?"

The nester eyed his wife hopelessly.

"However, there are extenuating circumstances. In view of these, I have decided to parole you to your wife."

Hope gleamed wildly in the prisoner's eyes.

"Mrs. Benton will report to me regularly, and if at any time you frequent a saloon, or are remiss in your duties as husband and father, I shall instruct the sheriff to arrest you on the original charge, and it will go hard with you indeed. Is that plain?" the Judge asked.

Baldy gulped, his thin features reflecting incredulous joy. "Yes, Jedge," he choked. "I'll run straight, honest, I will."

Tears streamed from his eyes, as his wife clasped him to her breast, gently patting his quivering shoulders as though he were a wayward child.

Arms clasped around each other, walking as though in a dream, they stumbled from the office.

Pat broke the silence that followed. "Reckon I'll go brace the limey."

THE DUSKY Tina ushered him into Doc Trimble's house.

Pat's eyebrows rose as a girl's laughter reached his ears.

"Miss Hampton," explained the squaw. "She limey's woman. He funny man. Make much laugh."

The sheriff followed her along the passage and opened the door of the hospital room. Telford, the photographer, was bundled up in a comfortable armchair. Propped to a sitting position with pillows, the Englishman lay abed, puffing at a new briar pipe. Beside the bed sat Phyllis Hampton, face aglow.

Montgomery waved his pipe in cheery greeting at sight of Pat. "Ah, the sleuth! So you killed the villain! I hear all, know all, tell all, my dear chap. And I strongly suspect you have a warrant for my arrest." He turned to the girl." You see, my sweet, you are about to marry a suspect, ere long I may wear a convict's stripes. Recant, while there is yet time!"

Phyllis Hampton smiled. "Chauncey, you are doomed to double servitude! When I rope a man, he stays roped." Her voice softened, "I'd marry you if you were the greatest blackguard unhung. Now try and break loose, sir!"

"Such melodrama!" Montgomery grinned roguishly. "Well, break the bad news, sheriff. Do I go hence in irons?"

Pat pulled up a chair and soberly faced the irrepressible Englishman. "Why not spill it?" he suggested quietly. "Your hands are clean."

"Ye Gods, he has faith in me! But I suspect a trick. The sheriff's a wily bird, Phyllis! Well, there's no further need for secrecy, the whole world knows the Chicago and Rio Grande will lay steel through Powder Valley. Perhaps I had better, as you Westerners so aptly term it—spill my guts."

Montgomery grinned and tamped fresh tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. His wife-to-be applied a match and he drew contentedly.

"Let me see," he twinkled, "where shall I begin—at the beginning, of course! I am a special purchasing agent for the Chicago and Rio Grande Railroad. Pete Telford over yonder is my assistant. Our job is to buy land. Naturally, we operate in secret. If our connection with the railroad were suspected prices would skyrocket. We were sent to Powder Valley with instructions to acquire land for a right of way. To our amazement, another gentleman rode in on the same stage, the late lamented Markham, also to buy land.

"It was a very curious coincidence, and it was soon apparent that some get-rich-quick persons were aware that steel was coming through. How

they learned the closely guarded secret I do not profess to know. Well, they tried to discourage us. Pete was shot. I was fired upon several times. Ultimately, those poor misguided ranchers rendered me hors de combat.

"That is my story, sheriff, and I'll stick to it. By the way, you can broadcast the news I'll be back at the old stand in a week or two. We still need land. Now that the cat is out of the bag, I fear prices will be ruinous. Thank heavens the railroad has a deep pocket."

The sheriff rose, extended his hand. "Thanks, limey! I never did have you figgered f'r a crook. And congratulations!" He smiled towards the radiant Phyllis.

Sam and Ezra were hunkered on the Courthouse steps when Pat drifted along the plankwalk. The sheriff settled down beside them and built a smoke.

In silence, the three partners eyed the drowsy street—ponies lazily switching flies at the hitch rails, two women in poke bonnets emerging from the General Merchandise Store, a cur nosing around a garbage can.

"Quiet, ain't it!" said Pat, half-regretfully.

THE END

N. Nickelby Dickens

Returns In

Reasonable Doubt

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By T. W. Ford

J. FENIMORE YOST

is here again, chasing girls and murder—as he says

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Watch for the December

Crack DETECTIVE *Stories*

Hart was sorting out these worthless stones.

Benjie Bernardo couldn't figure his partner out, but even he could see that Hart was up to something which would trap a two-legged snake if it worked!

THEY WERE rounding the bend in the trail, two large men on two small burros, two tiny specks of moving color against the parched brown mountainside, when Hart Trumbull suddenly dismounted and began fumbling with his saddle-bag. Benjie Bernardo, the other half of the prospecting team, tore his eyes from the new frame house halfway down the mountainside, and surveyed his partner with astonishment.

"W'at in tarnation are you fixin' to do now, Hart?" he demanded, reining in his own animal reluctantly. The wood house perched on the side of the hill was the first sign of the dubious delights of the town of Breakneck, and after more than three months on the trail, even Breakneck looked pretty good.

Hart was squatting on the ground with the saddle-bag. He opened it quickly,and dumped the contents carefully into a pile in front of him, before he answered.

"Fixin' to make all thet fancy diggin' we done pay off," he said finally, picking up one piece of bright rock

after another, and examining them closely.

Benjie watched, and concentrated on keeping his mouth shut. He'd been traveling with Hart long enough to know that he was likely to find out more faster if he asked questions slower.

Gradually, two piles grew, one in front of each of Hart's bony knees. In the right-hand heap, bright glints made no secret of the richness of the ore. In the pile on the left, an occasional bright sparkle, and a lot of dull-grey indicated a fairly low-grade vein. Benjie watched his partner's stringy fingers bring each piece of ore up in front of his waving red beard for careful scrutiny, and then place it in the pile it fitted. A dismal suspicion was beginnng to grow in his mind.

Hart worked in silence. Finally, Benjie realized there wasn't going to be any information volunteered. There was nothing to lose by asking.

"I never knowed you to do anythin' crosswise to the law, or anyways dishonest, Hart," he began dubiously, but his redheaded partner surprised him by breaking in before he finished.

"Nor you never will," he said flatly, without taking his eyes off his peculiar job. "But there's some as does, an' there's somethin' in the sight o' thet wood frame house o' Jed Tarker's thet made up my mind fer me. Thet Tarker don't work hard enough nor prospect frequent enough to of built himself a brand new house."

Benjie tried that every which way around, but it still came around to the same answer.

"I dunno, Hart," he said slowly and unhappily. "Yore th' brains o' this outfit, an' I ain't gonna quarrel with ya if yore min's made up. But if yore fixin' to give ole man Patchen oney one o' them piles, then there's trickery in it, an' yore jus' gonna hafta fin' some other outfit t'be th' brains of, 'cause one willa gone plumb outa business."

HART GAVE his partner a quizzical look from under bushy red brows. It looked as if he was trying to make up his mind about something, but when he finally spoke again, there was no telling what he'd been thinking about.

"Lissen, Benjie, Tarker grubstaked us this trip didn't he?"

Benjie nodded suspiciously.

"An thet paper we signed with 'im, it give 'im the right to buy out our half o' whatever we made, didn't it?"

Again, Benjie nodded mutely.

"An' if he sees this high-grade here, chances are he'll buy us out fer a purty good price, won't 'e?"

"Tha's what I wuz thinkin' you wuz after, Hart." Benjie had traveled with Hart for a long time now, and the two of them had been as close as two men get all alone with each other in the mountains, but there were some things he wasn't going to do, even for Hart. 'He'll mebbe buy you out, Pard, but I come out here t'mine gold, not to sell no gold-mines. I'm plannin' on makin' my pile diggin' it up, without no need for enny kin' o' trickery."

"Now lissen, Benjie, an' lissen careful. Tarker dee-cide to buy us out, you nor nobuddy is a-goin' t'have a chance t'say no, nor to do no trickery neither. Las' fella refused to sell out when Tarker took a notion t'buy, he disappeared in a mighty miss-teerious manner."

"I recolleck," Benjie retorted, "an' I also recolleck nobuddy never proved nothin' agains' Jed Tarker. An' also when we signed that 'air paper, you sayin' it didn' mean he c'd buy us out if we didn' wanta sell, but jus' if we did, he hadda have firs' crack at it."

Hart placed the rock he had in his hands carefully onto the left hand pile, and stopped to run his long skinny hands through his flaming thatch of hair. "Yore keerect on all counts, Benjie." His voice was pleading. "But lissen to me now. I got a hunch, Benjie, an' I think thet Tarker hombre is bad clear through. I'm a-fixin' to check on thet hunch, an' I don't aim to do my checkin' by handin' 'im the best strike we made so far,

Now," he went on earnestly, "we go on in to town, an' we git Bill Patchen to assay the lot o' this. Jed Tarker'd know afore we did jes how rich it is."

"Shore," said Benjie. "He wuz in thick enough with th' ole man even afore he married up with Betsy Patchen."

"Yeah..well this hunch o' mine is a-tellin' me, Jed'd know how rich our claim is, but *we* wouldn't. Jed offer us a price higher'n it seem worth f'm whut Bill Patchen tells *us*, how we goin' t' git outa sellin' to 'im? Now lookee here, Benjie, I got a way figgered out t' fin' out jes how far them two 'll go. I aint fixin' t'give 'im the high-grade. I aim to hand Bill Patchen this hyar pile." He pointed to the dull rocks on the left, and began at the same time to load them back into the saddle-bag.

Benjie scowled. "You gone plumb loco, Hart? Y'can't put anythin' like that over, an' you oughta know it. Soon's we start workin' that claim, Tarker'll fin' out there's better ore in't th'n w'at we showed Patchen, 'n then we'll really have trouble. W'at in tarnation...?"

"Lookee here, Benje," Hart broke in almost desperately, "We're a-goin' in to town, an' yore a-goin' to git tanked up. So'm I, but there's them as talks when they're tanked, an' there's them as doesn't and yore one o' them as does. You jes got t'take it upon my word, I aint fixin' to pull none o' Tarker's kind o' tricks, not even on Tarker hisself. I got a trick o' sorts in mind, true ee-nuff, but it aint noways outside th'law or otherwise dishonest."

HE WAS standing up, his red beard flapping violently in Benjie's face. The saddle-bag was tied back onto the burro, and the kerchief full of high-grade ore was in the supplies bag on Benjie's animal.

"B'leeve me, Benjie," he finished. "We're a-goin' to claim that strike, honest, an' we're a-goin' to make mighty shore we get dealt with honest too. Oney if you was to have all th' facts you'd blab 'em inside o' twenty-fore hours at the Rope."

Benjie thought of his last visit to town, and the things he'd said to a certain girl under the glowing influence of the Rope and Halter's rotgut. He kicked his burro forward almost viciously, and rode the rest of the way down the trail into town with his eyes fixed on that wood frame house, and the things Hart had said and done swimming unhappily in his mind. None of it added up right, but Hart had never done anything that couldn't be trusted before. Benjie clung to that thought as they rode into town.

BREAKNECK hadn't changed since they left, except for Jed Tarker's house being finished. Nobody else had taken the trouble yet to put up a real wood house. In the middle of town, the Rope and Halter stood over its little brood of miners' huts, its peaked wood roof like the ruffled feathers of a hen guarding her chicks. But the sides of the saloon, like the walls and roof of the huts, were nothing but heavy muslin stretched over a wooden frame.

Two or three new huts had been added since they were in Breakneck last, built like their own shack; a two-by-four in each corner, a couple of beams across the top for bracers, and cloth stretched tight on top and around the sides. It was the quickest, cheapest way to build and it kept out most of the rain and some of the sun. It didn't offer much in the way of privacy, but prospectors who spent all but a few weeks of each year up in the hills by themselves weren't looking for isolation when they hit town.

The two partners rode into Breakneck trail-weary and thirsty as any other prospecting team, but not too weary or thirsty to miss making Bill Patchen's assay office the first stop.

Benjie let Hart do all the talking. Whatever the gangling redhead had up his sleeve, it was his play, and Benjie had made up his mind not to

take any active part in the scheme until he knew where it was heading. He kept his eyes on Bill Patchen, and wondered how Hart could figure this gentle-faced old man was in on any crooked stuff Jed Tarker was pulling.

Hart threw the saddle-bag down on the table in Patchen's office.

"Not much luck this time," he said laconically, then pulled out a small leather bag from his pocket. "Got a little dust, though. Did a mite of' placer-minin'. Thet low-grade that," he pointed to the saddle bag, "Prob'ly aint wuth minin' atall, but we staked us out a claim there ennyhow, an' we'll make it all legal now."

The old man weighed the bag of dust, and carefully measured out half of it for Jed Tarker's share as grubstaker. He dumped the big bag, and shook his head. "Don't look like you got much here, son, but I'll run off the tests for ye anyways. Never can tell from lookin'. Whar at's them diggin's o' yourn?"

Hart gave him a location, and Benjie gasped. "Hey!" He couldn't stop himself. "W'at you doin', Pard. That ain't the one. ."

"Shore is," Hart interrupted smoothly. " 'Tother one didn't pan out atall. Don't you recollect, Benjie?"

Benjie swallowed hard and nodded his head. There was a hard lump in his stomach as he watched Hart turn back to the old man, grinning easily.

"My pal here is so dry he caint keep his mind on nothin' but gittin over to th' Rope," Hart was saying, but Benjie's mind was on the location Hart had given Bill Patchen. They'd staked that spot out all right, but after they hit the rich vein on the other side of the hill they'd dumped the poor samples from the first strike.

They made out the form assigning a half-ownership to Tarker, and Benjie signed it unhappily. The whole thing looked bad; it didn't make sense, and he wanted to know more about it. But the idea of staying cold sober while he was in town was a little hard to take, and Hart was right about the chances of his blabbing once he'd had a few hours of liquid refreshment.

HALFWAY to the saloon, Hart stopped suddenly, and said he'd take care of the burros and meet Benjie later on inside the Rope. Benjie was still trying to decide whether he wanted to know anymore. But one thing he had to be sure of.

"You know we caint keep that other strike quiet, don't ya, Hart?"

"I said we was goin' to claim, an' I aim to claim it, Jed Tarker to the contrariwise," Hart said flatly, and he was telling the truth. If he wasn't, Benjie reflected, as he watched his friend lead off the animals, there was no use trying to make out what he was doing, because if ever a man looked like he meant what he said, Hart Trumbull looked like it then.

It was well along after midnight when Benjie found himself leaning heavily on Hart's shoulder, just outside the swinging doors of the Rope and Halter, with the night wind hitting his face like a bucket of cold water. As he sobered up, uneasy memories of the evening began popping into his mind.

He took his arm from Hart's bony shoulders, and tried a few steps by himself. It seemed to work all right. The trouble was, as his footsteps got steadier, his memory got clearer. He turned to Hart abruptly.

"Awright, w'at'd I spill tonight?" he demanded.

"Jes' about whut I figgered ye would," Hart chortled. "You tole 'em all, one at a time, in ab-soh-lute deepes' confidence, mind you, you tole 'em all as how we struck it rich, oney I wasn't a-goin' t'let Jed Tarker know nothin' about it. Mostly, they didn't b'leeve it, and most o' them as did b'leeve it, they thought it wuz a purty good idea, but there was a couple o' hombres there that've found a chance by now to hand over all the deee-tails t'Brother Jed hisself."

Benjie's fuzzy mind tried to figure out just what was wrong with all

this. By the time they reached their own hut he realized that Hart should have been mad at him for blabbing everything, and instead he sounded downright happy about the whole thing. Benjie tried to figure it out, but he was too tired. He flopped down on his own cot, and knew nothing more till someone began shaking him violently by the shoulder.

A candle was flickering on the table, and Hart's orange bush was waving over him.

"W'at time is it?" Benjie muttered.

"Time t'git up."

Benjie pulled his pocket watch down from the shelf nailed to the corner post, and gave a snort of disgust.

"W'at in tarnation y'wanna roll me outa th' sack at three in th' mornin' for?" He would have rolled over and gone to sleep, but there something in the urgency of Hart's whisper that woke him up instead.

"You got t'git up, Benjie. We got a job on our han's, an' we got t'git at it. Would of done it when we come in, oney you wuz too polutted, so's I figgered I'd do better t'give you a chance t'sleep it off firs'. Oughter be clear in the haid by now."

Benjie sat up in sharp discomfort at the unremembered lumpiness of the mattress, and shook himself wide awake.

"W'at you fixin' ta do, Hart?" He demanded. "I aint gonna do a thing, without I got some idea where to this is all leadin' us?"

Hart held up an old saddle-bag. "Way I figger it," he said, "all we're a-goin' t'do right now is invite some rapid home-ee-side. We're a-goin' to pack these here rocks in a shippin' crate, an' if it works out the way I figger it, you better git yore fists an' yore guns both ready fer trouble."

Benjie's feet found the floor, and he stood up reluctantly. "I wanna know w'at for we're askin' for trouble?"

"Why, jes t'see if Jed Tarker's anxious fer some."

"What makes ya think he is?"

"On account of you wuz so o—bleegin' as to send him word as how we struck it rich. He knows f'm Bill Patchen by now that we didn't give 'im nothin' wuth assayin'. But he heerd about whut you wuz a-sayin' in the Rope, an' it's shootin' sartin' he heerd by now as how this hyar candle came a-lit half 'nhour back. I figger he's out thar now, watchin' to' see whut we're up to, er if he aint, he shore got one o' his boys on th' lookout."

Hart sat down at the table, and dumped the saddle bag noisily. "You set over there, Benjie, then he got a clear view o' everthin' we do in front o' this here candle.

BENJIE let himself fall into the chair, and watched the cascade of polished stones rattle out of the bag onto the table.

"Hey, that aint the ore! That's them stones you been savin' for yore kid sister. W'ere's th'...?"

Hart motioned him to lower his voice. "Shore it's th' rock collection. Don't think I'm fixin' to let 'im git his hands on th' real stuff, do ye?" He began packing the colored stones into the wooden box on the table, moving so that his silhouette on the muslin walls would show anyone outside exactly what he was doing. Benjie reached over for a handful and began to work unwillingly.

"Oney thing," Hart added after a minute, "is, I'm a-countin' on you, whenever, th' shootin' starts, t'fight fer these hyar purty stones as hard as ef you wuz fightin' fer th' ore itself. But ennybuddy asks you whut's in here, why, you jes tell 'em the Gawd's hones' truth."

Benjie grunted, half in confusion, half in disapproval.

They worked after that, quietly and efficiently, as any two men who have worked together for a long time. When all the rocks were packed, and the crate securely sealed, Hart took great pains to put it away under his cot, so that the spies outside, whoever they were, would be sure to see exactly what he'd done with it.

Then he blew out the candle, and they both rolled back into their sacks and waited.

For half an hour both of them lay still. They heard a rustling outside that meant somebody going away, then a few minutes later returning footsteps, and a whispered conference. After that, the footsteps retreated again, and there was nothing but the night noises of the mountain to be heard.

Finally Hart's voice cut across the little room in a sharp whisper. "Guess ole Jed's dee-cided to play it smart. We'll be a-hearin' from 'im tomorrow, I don't doubt. Go on to sleep, Benjie, but don't sleep too heavy."

WHEN THEY woke, the sun was beating through the thin walls, and a loud voice was beating at the door.

"You hombres daid in thar?"

"C'mon in, Jed." That was Hart. Benjie rolled over, and raised his head, dropping his cot under it to make a pillow. Jed Tarker swung open the creaking muslin-covered frame that served as a door, and stood inside, his big body filling the doorway.

"Like to have a leetle talk with you," Jed said heavily.

"Shore thing." Hart's voice was hearty and guileless. "C'mon in an' make yoreself comfortable, Jed. Right glad t'see you."

Tarker stepped forward and settled himself heavily on the rickety chair Benjie had occupied during the night.

"Onnerstan' you boys hit it rich this trip?"

"Seen Bill Patchens?" Hart asked, grinning.

"Nope; some o' th' boys was over to the Rope las' night, an' yore pardner hyar," he pointed to Benjie, "seem like he had a mite t' say." He left it hanging there.

"Benjie's got dee-lo-sions," Hank said. "Go see Patchen. He'll tell you whut we brung in."

"Don' know whut you give Bill," Jed said slowly. "But I'll shore fin' out. Soon's the assay's done, we kin straighten out our accounts together." His hand ran lightly over the surface of the table, and came up with a thin layer of stone-dust, from the bag Hart had dumped on the table the night before. He held up his hand and examined it carefully, but said nothing more. Instead, he rose abruptly, and went to the door. Then he turned back, and spoke lazily.

"I'll shore mak' a point o' seein' Bill Patchen but I may's well tell ye now, I'm a-thinkin' o' takin' on another mine, an' if yores is anywheres near good, I might wan' t'talk business."

"Shore thing," Hart agreed. "Goin' over to see Patchen m'self firs' thing this mornin', an' I'll consarn m'self with seein' you im-mee-jutly afterwa'ds."

Benjie rolled out of bed as soon as Tarker was gone, with a groan of discomfort. "This here mattress is more like a sack o' coal ever' time we come in here," he complained.

Hart didn't answer. He lay still on his own cot, staring idly at the ceiling, and humming softly to himself Benjie was all dressed before Hart had moved. At the door he turned and inquired sourly. "Plannin' to spen' th' day gettin' a rest cure?"

"Nope."

"W'at you figgerin' on doin' with that there crate?"

"Thet's jes whut I'm a-figgerin' on right now. Caint stay here 'n watch it all day." He didn't sound very worried.

BENJIE WENT out, slamming the flimsy door as much as he dared. He wandered over to the Rope And Halter, and was already gulping down steaming coffee, after a substantial breakfast, when Hart appeared, hiding a beaming smile behind his red brush, and carrying the crate with both hands.

With a loud sigh of relief, he put the heavy bundle down on the bar-counter.

"Hey, Pete!"

The bartender - cook - waiter put

down the glass he was polishing, and ambled down behind the bar to where Hart was standing.

"How y'doin' boy?"

"Jes fine, an' hungry as hades fer some o' them flapjacks o' yores. Lissen Pete, I'd appree-shee-ate t' leave this hyar crate in here till t'morrow." He lowered his voice to a majestic whisper that could be heard in every corner of the room. 'It's right val-yu-able, an' I want t' send it back east on the stage t'morrow. Reckon it'll be purty safe out hyar in plain sight."

"Safe enough till I close up," Pete said. "Ennybuddy c'd git in after hours."

Hart seemed to think that over, his red beard wiggling up and down as he chewed on his lip.

"Wa'al then," he said slowly, "bes' thing is if I leave it here till it come closin' time, then take it on back to the shack."

He left the bar and came over to join Benjie at the table. Within a few minutes he was deep in a mountain of flapjacks. Benjie watched him eat, and waited till nobody else was in earshot. Then he put his question quietly.

"Hart, w'at's in that crate?"

"Same thing we put into it las' night."

"You shore o' that?"

"Shore as I can be. Whut else 'd be in there?"

"Ore. High-grade ore."

Hart surveyed him with wide astonished eyes. "Whut fer?"

"T' send off sum'airs else to file that there claim." He was watching Hart carefully, and nothing could have been farther from what he expected than the guffaw his partner let out.

"Now, Benjie, yore a-gittin' t' be silly. You oughter know any claim filed on a low-cay-shun in these parts, Bill Patchen'd be notified anyways, so's he wouldn' take any doo-plee-cate claims on it. Wouldn' make much sense, would it?"

"Not 'nless ya had sum'un else workin' with ya, t'file it in another name."

"Think I have?" Hart's eyes twinkled at him. Benjie had no answer for that. It just wasn't possible to believe that Hart could have been planning something like this during all the four years they'd been together, and Benjie knew for sure that Hart had any chance to make any such arrangement duing those four years. He turned the whole cockeyed mess over in his mind again, and it still didn't make sense. Finally, he dropped it, and started on another angle.

"Seen Patchen?" he asked.

"Yep."

"W'at'd 'e say?"

"Lies." Hart pushed away the empty flapjack plate, and reached for his coffee. "Said that ore wuz jes about twice 's good as it had enny right t'be, jedgin' frm th' looks of it."

"Mebbe it is."

"An' mebbe Jed Tarker fell into a trap. Keer to lay a bet he'll be comin' in wantin' t' buy?"

WHATEVER he wanted, he was certainly coming in. The big man paused a minute in the doorway, to let his eyes adjust to the gloom inside, after the glare outdoors. Then he sighted Hart and Benjie at the table, and strode over.

"Jus saw Bill Patchen," he announced.

"Saw 'im a few minnits back m'self," Hart answered.

"Yore ore tested out a lot better'n it looked," Tarker sounded too friendly. "Keer t'sell yore half?" He looked from one to the other.

"Nope." Hart's voice held finality.

"You signed a paper fore you took yore grubstake," Jed reminded him.

"Shore." Hart paused for a gulp of coffee. "But thet paper oney says *if* we want t' sell, we haf t' give you firs' chance. We don' want t' sell."

"You gone plumb loco, Hart?" Benjie demanded. It was one thing to be honest, but it was something else again to refuse to sell that claim when Tarker had all the facts on it. Anybody who tried to work that spot

would be crazy. "Shut up, Benjie," Hart said, very gently."

Then he turned back to Tarker. "We ain't sellin'," he announced, "An' that's final. Stayin' aroun' town jus' long enough to see the coach come through from Hangtown tomorrow, an' send on thet bundle I got fer my sister." He stopped, and made sure Jed saw the crate. "Then we're goin' on out. Picked up enough dust this trip to stake ourselves."

"Thet yer las' word?"

"That's m'las' word."

"I'm right sorry." Jed stood up, somehow menacing though he made no angry moves, and his voice was still very friendly. "I shore hate to see you do yoreself a disservice like thet, but I know if yore min's made up, Hart Trumbull, ain't nothin' gonna change it but a bullet right through it."

"Ain't nobuddy'd want t'shoot me, Jed." Hart went on serenely drinking his coffee, while Jed marched out, barely concealing his ill temper.

BENJIE SPENT most of the day in the Rope 'N Halter. Everybody who came in seemed to be curious about the crate, and Benjie obliged one and all with complete details about what was in it and why.

By the time evening came, he was heartily sick of the whole subject. Hart had been in and out of the saloon all day, taking care of the animals and getting supplies for their next trip. Ordinarily, Benjie would have been just as busy, but he wasn't too sure he even wanted to go out with Hart again, and he didn't plan to lift a finger about getting out of town till he knew what his partner was up to.

Hart came in for supper, and stayed around afterwards. This was one night Benjie had made up his mind to stay sober, but Hart seemed to be feeling just the other way. He didn't drink much, but it began to hit him faster then Benjie had ever seen before. By closing time, Benjie was just about conscious enough to realize that Hart was even drunker than he was.

Together, they stumbled out, and wheeled around outside, trying to pick out the right direction to find their own shack. Tonight it was Hart's arm that was flung across Benjie's shoulders, so when Hart tripped and fell, Benjie went down too.

They hit the ground at the same time, in the shelter of the first of the row of muslin-covered huts. Hart's sharp whisper in his ear, after the cold air and the shock of the fall, got Benjie sober enough to understand what he heard.

"Make like yore tryin' to git up, Benjie, but stay down. Let 'em think we both passed out."

A couple of things started sorting themselves out in Benjie's mind. Hart wasn't drunk. He was cold sober, and expecting trouble. That was all Benjie needed. If trouble was coming he could hit as hard, or shoot as straight, full of alcohol as he could full of water. He rested his hand on his gunbutt and waited.

Someone walked quietly by them, then came back, and kicked them, one at a time, just hard enough to hurt, not so hard it would wake up a couple of drunks. Benjie lay still.

By his side, Hart was snoring, slow and loud. The kick brought a muffled grunt and an offbeat in the snore from him nothing more. Benjie himself was fooled for a minute, and when the footsteps had passed on, nudged Hart sharply. In the moonlight, he could see one eye open, and wink deliberately, the while a snore issued from the chasm over the bushy growth on his partner's chin.

THE MEN in the saloon made little enough noise. Benjie couldn't see anything, facing the way he was, until they were halfway across the cleared section. There were three of them, carrying the crate between them up to Jed Tarker's house, the only place in town where a man could use a light at night without everyone else knowing about it. Hank let them get another 100 yards uphill before he nudged Benjie to his feet, and the two

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of them started running, silently.

They were close to the little group, before anyone heard them. As the three men wheeled and dropped the crate to grab for their guns, Hart yelled to Benjie.

"Shoot! Shoot in the air, or shoot at 'em' Benjie But shoot! Get folks out."

Benjie had his gun out a split second after Hart, and they were both firing, before Hart's last words came out and before the others had a chance to draw. Benjie let his first shot go up in the air, harmless, but by the time he fired the second, he realized the men on the other side were more serious about it. He winged the foremost, putting a bullet clean through his gunhand, and saw at the same time that Hart had got a second one in the shoulder.

"Grab a hunk o' sky, Jed Tarker, or I'll blow yore brains out, an' you know it."

Miners were gathering in a cautious group behind the shelter of the saloon, and when the guns were silenced they came out in a rush. Benjie found himself, along with Hart and their three opponents, being tied into a chair inside the Rope and Halter. Big Jim Hennessey was sitting up on the bar, yelling at everybody to shut up. When the room was quiet, he turned to Hart.

"This thing don't look good." He said sourly. "We ain't had no gunplay in town since we come here, an' whut's more, we don't like it."

Hart's beard rose to a red tip pointed straight at Jim. "You'd ruther be robbed regular by Jed Tarker thar? You know as good as I do whut he's been a-doin' aroun' here. Now you got 'im red-handed, stealin' my personal property. We got a good reason to han' him over to the Marshall. Whut more d' you want?"

"I want to know whut this monkey business is about," Hennessey retorted.

"TIME NOW ever'buddy sh'd know," Hart said. "Don't y'ver stop to wonder, all of you, whut makes a man like Jed Tarker here

(Continued On Page 106)

Patterson's Boots and Boothill

By John T. Lynch

A True Story

FERD PATTERSON firmly believed in the superstition which was spread throughout the Territories of Washington and Idaho, in the early 1860's that a man who "died with his boots on" had, at some former time of life, sneakingly stabbed a man in the back. No matter what the circumstances under which a man met his end—executed by the law or even shot while defending himself from outlaws—if he had his boots on when he expired it was a give-away, arranged by fate, that he had, at one time in the past, killed a man by one of the very few methods frowned upon.

The vast number of men who were dying with their boots on, day and night, in all of the tough and bustling mining towns, as the result of feuds, arguments, gambling quarrels, robberies and murders, should have proved to those who believed in the superstition that it was ridiculous. They couldn't *all* have possibly have had that darkest of sins on their calloused souls. But the belief persisted—and Ferd Patterson always swore that he would never die with his boots on. He wanted people to respect him, after he was dead, and didn't want it said of him that he had ever stabbed a man in the back.

Yet, for a man who had a constant dread of dying with his boots on, Ferd Patterson's general conduct was such as to invite that unwanted condition of death time after time. Never a day passed that he did not get involved in gunplay or threatening violence of some kind. He never avoided trouble, as it might be thought that one who held firmly to such an odd superstition would. Instead, he went out of his way to stir up bad feelings, fights and violence. Having great confidence in his own ability to beat any man to the draw, it was his custom to enter a saloon, look around until he saw a stranger whose looks he did not like, and heckle the individual into making a move for his gun. Thus, although he killed many men, simply because he liked to kill, he always had the accepted "self-defense" alibi.

The Civil War was still raging, and, when all else failed, Patterson could always goad a man into gunplay by asking him which side he hoped would win. If the unsuspecting stranger had Union sympathies, Patterson immediately became a

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Secessionist and denounced the Northerners with plenty of insulting profanity. If a stranger, on being asked, said that he was on the side of the South, Patterson transformed himself into an ardent and irate supporter of Lincoln and the Union.

SEATED in an obscure corner of a saloon in Portland, one night, Patterson watched quietly when a Captain Staples, somewhat drunk, roared into the place, ordered drinks for everybody in the house, and boisterously insisted that they should all drink a toast to the Union. The opportunity was too good for Patterson to let pass. He walked over to Staples and said, "To hell with the Union!"

Staples reached for his weapon, but he was a bit too late. Before he could raise the gun, Patterson had put a bullet through the Captain's head.

Patterson was arrested but, as usual, the next day he was tried and acquitted. That night he went back to the same saloon to celebrate his acquittal. During the course of the celebration he called Miss Texas Blaine, his favorite dance hall girl, over to his table to keep him company for awhile. While they were drinking together, Miss Texas must have said something that Patterson did not approve of, because he unsheathed his bowie-knife, reached over the table, and before the shady lady knew what was happening, she had been scalped.

Once again Ferd Patterson was arrested and held for trial. They delayed the legal proceedings long enough to learn whether Miss Texas was going to live or die as the result of her wound. Luckily, she lived. Miss Texas was a kindhearted, if slightly disreputable, female. She refused to bring charges against Patterson, and said that it had been her own fault in the first place. When the sheriff tried to argue her into pressing charges, she reminded him, vehemently, that it had been she—and not the sheriff—who had been scalped.

In justice to Patterson it might be pointed out that, some months later,

he ordered a beautiful blonde wig, through a mail-order house in the East, and sent it to Miss Texas as a token of esteem. However, he had to spoil this generous gesture, in a way, by enclosing the following note:

"Deer Miss Tex—
Pleeze use this purty wig to cover yore bald spot. Also, if I ever see you again, and feel like scalping you, I won't have to take any flesh with it.
Yores trooly, Ferd Patterson."

A SHORT time after the scalping affair, and the killing of Captain Staples, Patterson left Portland and headed for the Washington Territory, from whence were coming rumors of rich gold strikes. In Washington, the people were not as lenient to Patterson as they had been in Oregon. After he had become involved in a few bloody scrapes he was hounded out of the Territory and made his way to the brand new Territory of Idaho, which had just been organized.

Idaho City was being run by a gambler and former bad man named "Pink" Pinkham, who had reformed—to a certain extent. Pinkham, a native of Maine, was more than six feet tall and weighed around two-hundred pounds. He had the agility of an acrobat and the sharp eye of the professional gambler. Having been on the frontier for a long time, he was highly skilled in the use of all types of lethal weapons, and had a reputation for amazing speed in his use of them. Despite his past record, when Idaho became a Territory, the Governor appointed Pink sheriff of Boise County. Soon afterwards he became United States marshal. He had a lot of good friends in Idaho City and hated all the criminal element in the town. However, this element was in the majority, and the town was split into two factions when Patterson arrived.

In Patterson the lawless element saw a new leader. They knew him by reputation. Pinkham, too had heard of Patterson, so when the latter ar-

(Continued On Page 94)

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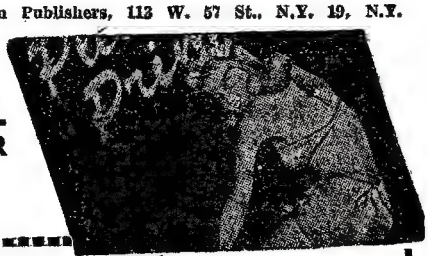

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(Continued From Page 93)

rived in the area Pinkham went to him, directly, and warned him to stay straight, and not cause any trouble.

In answer to this stern warning, Patterson organized a band and illegally acquired a brewery by kidnapping and murdering the original owners. Pinkham could not prove what had occurred. Patterson had, in his possession, forged papers of ownership. Everybody surmised the real facts behind the case, but Pink's hands were tied, as long as he had no proof that Patterson had no right to operate the brewery.

The trouble over the brewery served to strengthen the two men's hatred for each other. This hatred had been slowly growing since the first day Patterson had arrived in the town. It became a well known fact that Pink and Patterson were both awaiting the time when there would be an excuse for a real showdown.

WARM SPRINGS was a popular bathing resort a few miles out of Idaho City. One day, in company of several friends, Pinkham went out to the resort for a day of relaxation and peaceful drinking.

Patterson, who had been on a prolonged alcoholic bat, decided, at the wrong time, that a warm bath would help him sober up. Not knowing that Pinkham and his friends were having a party there that day, Patterson, accompanied by Ed Tarry, rode out to Warm Springs. When they arrived, Pinkham and his friends were on the porch of the combination bath-house, hotel and saloon. They were loudly singing a patriotic Union song. This gave Patterson the opening he wanted—but he knew he was not quite sober enough to risk a gun fight with Pinkham. Instead of making a hostile move, or saying anything to rouse Pinkham just then, he and Terry dismounted, walked up on the porch, and walked on in through the door that led out to the pool.

The bath did its expected work. Patterson put on his clothes, donned his gun belt, and walked into the saloon section of the resort. He was

ready for action. "Where's that dirty Unionist, Pink?" he asked.

"Out on the porch," someone answered. The door leading directly on the porch from the saloon was open and Pinkham had heard every word.

Patterson stepped out onto the porch turned to the right, and was face-to-face with Pinkham. The two glared at each other for a short time. Then, hurling a dirty name at Pinkham, Patterson said, "Draw, will you?"

"Gladly," answered Pinkham. Both men went for their guns. Patterson proved to be the quicker. His bullet lodged high up on Pinkham's right shoulder, just as Pinkham fired. The force of the bullet spoiled his aim; Pinkham's bullet hit the roof. Patterson fired a second time, but the cap failed to explode. Patterson fired a third time, before the disabled Pinkham could cock his revolver for another shot. This bullet hit Pinkham near the heart, and he toppled down the steps. Somehow, he found the strength to finally get his gun cocked, as he lay, dying, at the foot of the steps. With his final breath he rolled over, aimed, and fired up at Patterson. The bullet seared his side and knocked him down the steps, where he crumpled up on the body of his former enemy.

Thinking that his wound, too, was fatal, Patterson remembered his dread of dying with his boots on. "Hurry, Terry," he gasped, in what he thought would be his last breath, "get my boots off, quick!"

TERRY removed the boots—but Patterson had only a minor wound. In a little while he was able to ride into town and give himself up. He was correct in believing he had nothing to fear from the law. There had been witnesses to the fight, and, according to the code of the times, it had been a fair duel.

Had Patterson died in the Warm Springs gunplay, as he thought he was going to, he would have, at least, been able to die with his boots off, as he always wished to do. And it might have been just as well, as he had to die as a result of this same

(Continued On Page 96)

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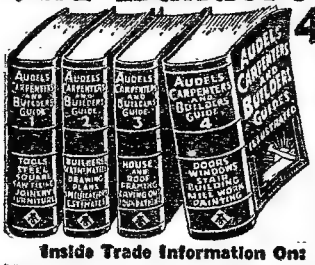

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 95)

fight, anyhow. But with his boots on.

Only one month after Pinkham's death, while Patterson was seated in a barber's chair getting a shave, one of Pinkham's old friends walked into the shop. "Patterson," he said, "I see your gun is out of reach. I could never beat you to a fair draw—so I think I will take this opportunity to square accounts, in the name of Pink!"

Patterson's gun belt was hanging on a hook up on the wall. As he realized the danger of the situation he made a lunge to jump out of the barber chair. The barber, also a friend of Pinkham—and a heavy, powerful man—pushed Patterson back in the chair and jumped aside just as the man welding the gun pulled the trigger. Patterson slumped in the chair, then slowly fell in a heap on the floor. He gasped weakly, once or twice, and reached down to try to loosen his boot laces. Donahue, the killer, walked over, stood directly above the wounded man who was trying, with his last vestige of strength, to remove his boots, and fired two more shots through the top of Patterson's bleeding skull. With a final, convulsive jerk, Patterson died.

His boots were still on.

THE END

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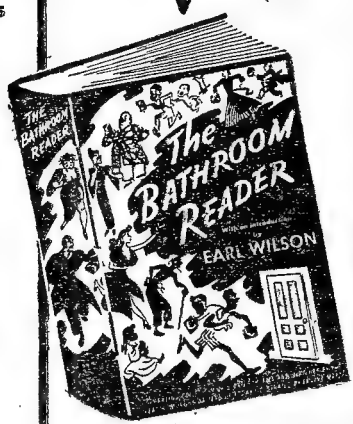

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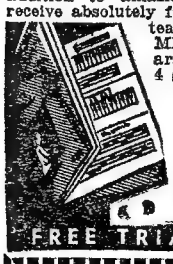

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Win A Hotel— Two Bucks!

A True Story

By Rex Whitechurch

ONE OF THE MOST sensational national lotteries ever to take place in this country was the raffling off of the World's Hotel. Throughout the wild west, in the year, 1863, in the dance halls and saloons of gold camps and cow towns, the pale blue tickets were sold at two dollars each.

More than three million ducats went like wild fire, once the word got around that the holder of the winning tickets would get the biggest and finest hotel in the world, plus two acres of land in the heart of the business district of the growing frontier town, Saint Joe, Mo. It took two years and a million dollars to build the hotel, and the owner, Colonel John Patee pointed it out with pride as the world's finest hostelry, barring none at home or abroad.

For four years the monstrosity, equipped with elegant European fixtures, with blue and red plush curtains, fancy murals on walls and ceiling of the lobby, exotic tinted windows and crystal chandeliers, drew a land office business. You walked up the steep staircases on thick Brussels carpets. But the upkeep was so great that the hotel did not pay. Women had been imported to work in the dining rooms and the lobby, the most beautiful ladies to be found. But it took more than stunning women and an ornate castle of gold and gilded splendor to pay back what had been dumped into the building of this massive spectacle.

Colonel Patee knew he had a lemon on his hands, although it was as busy as any hotel could be, always filled to capacity and widely publicized as the sight of your lifetime. "If you haven't seen the World's Hotel, you haven't seen anything," said the la-

(Continued On Page 100)

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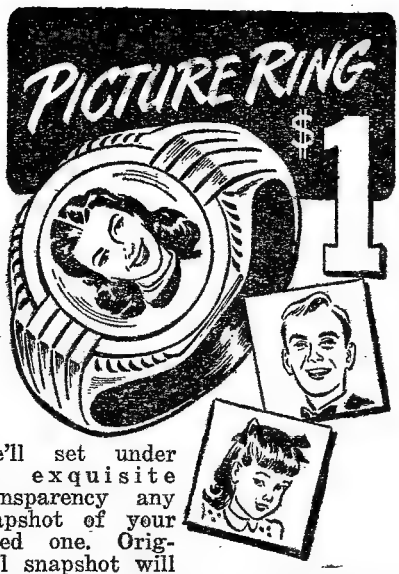

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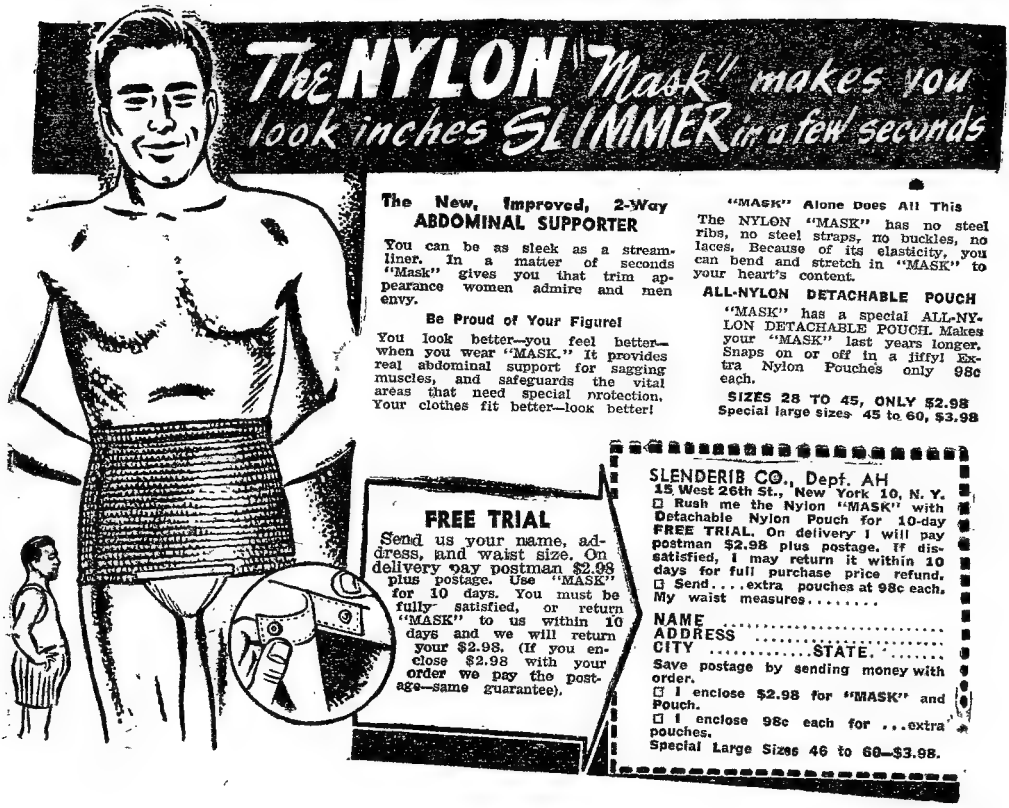

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(Continued From Page 98)

vish advertisements appearing in all the leading periodicals of the day.

Saint Joe was in its infancy, but the Pony Express had riveted national attention on the fast growing Missouri River town. Trains of covered wagons were arriving daily, to stop over, buy needed supplies and then to recommence the hazardous journeys across the Indian and road agent infested plains and mountains.

Cool, sleek gamblers stepped off the steamboats that came down river from Saint Louis and Kansas City. They made their headquarters at the World's Hotel, and thousands upon thousands of dollars changed hands hourly in those sumptuous suites on the top floor of this majestic pile of brick and mortar and stone and extravagant elaborateness.

Colonel Patee decided suddenly to raffle off the lemon. Somebody would win it, and no doubt he could take in enough money to recover his terrible losses. He laid his plans carefully, surrounded himself with experts in big lotteries, and by contributing twenty percent to charity he obtained a permit to conduct the raffle. It began on a cold winter's morning when three million pale blue tickets were unloaded in the Colonel's private office.

It took time to spread the tickets around to all the saloon men and painted dance hall belles that could be contacted to sell the ducats. Fifty cents went to the salesmen, the balance was sent by mail to Colonel Patee. In less than 90 days these tickets could be had in San Francisco and New York. Dodge City, Kansas, Abilene, and all the famous mining camps of the west.

UP TO WITHIN an hour of the drawing tickets could be had in the town, and people walked about through the streets crying their wares, saying it was your last chance to buy lottery tickets, and a man on a spring wagon stood at a corner of Edmond Street and sold the pale blue ducats right and left, yelling that the winning ticket was bound to be in the lot he was offering for sale.

WIN A HOTEL-TWO BUCKS

Hawkers walked along with the parade, keeping in step with the band and holding strings of tickets up so the crowd could see them. And without stopping or getting out of step, some of these clever salesmen peddled their ducats.

The streets of Joetown were lined with spectators from the levee to the top of King Hill, and when a mounted man began to cry, "Hurry, get to the World's Hotel, if you care to see the drawing. The wining ticket will be drawn at four o'clock. You'll have to hurry to get close enough to hear and see what goes on."

There was no disorder. Mobs from out of town rode and drove through congestions of crude traffic, often being held up until the mounted officers who directed the traffic could clear a way for them. Gambling parlors flourished, much money changed hands along Edmond Street, in the saloons and the honky tonks, and the dance halls did a thriving business. The painted, sprangled women enjoyed the most profitable day they ever experienced.

Booted and bearded the men from the trails patronized the livery stables and left their leg weary mounts to be fed and bedded down for the night. Many of them had come for hundreds of miles, had spent days in the saddle, and they were now out to get their breath before going to the scene of the lottery. Still the crowds came, covered wagons, horsemen, dusty and tired; Indians and soldiers, gamblers and men from the steamboats that had just docked, for the occasion.

Cattlemen drove vast herds of cattle to the Saint Joe stockyards from as far away as Arizona and Texas. Cowboys set out to be on hand, riding for many days, all with their lottery tickets zealously guarded. The afternoon of the drawing, seventy thousand itinerants roamed the narrow, dusty streets of Joetown, waiting impatiently for the excitement to begin.

Bands in garish uniforms and cake walking Negroes in blatant minstrel attire paraded up and down Edmond Street, turning at the Levee where

(Continued On Page 102)

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White Shirts
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These handsome shirts are made exclusively from sanforized fabrics
NOTE THESE IMPORTANT FEATURES
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L'ORMONE CO., DEPT. 247-B
220 Broadway New York 7, N. Y.
*Trade Mark

(Continued From Page 101)

several steamboats were docked, and marching back to the World's Hotel, led by famous Indian scouts and soldiers, while big American flags unfurled in the breeze over the handsome floats and uniformed marchers.

On the elaborate balcony of the World's Hotel which was decorated in cotton bunting, the mayor and the United States marshal, the sheriff and other armed men, arose to pay tribute to the man who had brought fame and big business to the liveliest town in the wild west. In his speech which took place a brief time before the drawing, Colonel Patee in his best oratorical manner said:

"I know that many of you feel the quick pounding of your hearts as the hour draws nigh, and far be it from me to attempt to increase your suspense. I see men down there from Texas and Oklahoma, from Arizona and the gold mining camps of Colorado, men who are making history. I want you all to know that I deeply appreciate your response to this lottery and to my efforts to make it a great occasion. But after all you don't care anything about me. I am just a cog in this great machine that had made it possible for some lucky person to walk away from here this afternoon sole owner of the biggest hotel in the world, a million dollars institution. So let the band play a march while we are getting ready!"

THE COWBOYS, grim faced riders from the alkali trails all over the far west, moved restlessly from pillar to post in the enormous crowd. It was far more exciting, the old timers say, than was the beginning of the frenzied race when the Cherokee strip was opened.

All kinds of rigs and men mounted on mules and in buckboards from nearby farms and ranches, were jammed up in the mighty throng that stewed and sweat under the brassy sun of the July day.

And when a little blonde girl, wearing a pale blue dress and blindfolded, was led out upon the balcony, followed by the sealed wooden cask

which was rolled behind her, a deafening roar came up from the tense, dry throats of the spectators.

A man swung a 20-pound sledge against the solid wooden head of the huge cask, and wood and splinters rained down into the upturned faces of the mob. The little girl was led to the barrel, and a deep hush fell over the spectators.

A man spoke from the balcony. "The third ticket this little girl pulls out of the barrel will be considered the winner. As stipulated in our advertising, the winner does not have to be present, but we will announce the name of the winner as soon as possible from this balcony!"

Not a sound came from the nervous crowd, and many of the faces turned up to the hot sun were clammy and glistened with the cold sweat of anxiety. The child with the yellow curls was seen to dip her little hand into the barrel of ducats. She drew forth a pale blue slip, and handed it to the man who promptly tore it up and let the pieces flutter away on the hot wind. Again the little hand slid out of sight into the barrel, and once more it came forth clutching a lottery ticket. Again this ducat was torn to shreds and hurled out upon the flat-iron wind.

And now the great moment had arrived. It came with bated breath ly manner in the street below, those Calmly the little girl stuck her hand into the barrel, and after what seemed an eternity her white hand reappeared, griping the winning ticket.

The man beside her took the ticket from her pale fingers and gazed at it thoughtfully. There was a small indication of nervousness and excitement in his attitude when he turned and beckoned to the others who stood waiting on the balcony.

While the crowd waited in an orderly manner in the street below, those on the balcony were seen to hold a soft-voiced but nervous conversation. And then Colonel John Patee, the man who had built the World's Hotel, was led forward, and the pale blue ticket was shown to him. At once a horrified expression was seen to roll over his face.

(Continued On Page 104)

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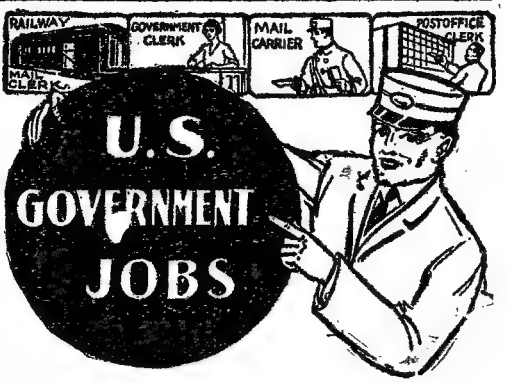

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 103)

He began at once to search his pockets, and he kept up this quest until he found a lottery ticket in one of his vest pockets. Another breathless moment followed. Then the master of ceremonies turned round, walked out to the front of the balcony, and leaning far over, shouted down at the crowd.

"The number of the winning ticket is ninety four thousand six hundred and seventy three. The holder of the ticket that bears that number is none other than Colonel John S. Patee, who has just won the right to keep his hotel and the two million dollars that the lottery has brought him in the way of profits. Three cheers for Colonel Patee!"

Thus ended the most bizarre national lottery ever held in the United States.

THE END

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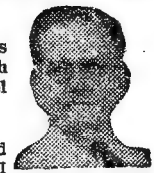

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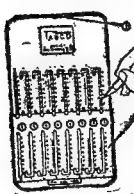

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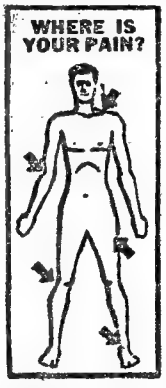

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STRIKE 'IM OUT

(Continued From Page 90)

git rich quick whilst the rest of us kills ourselves goin' out in the hills? Jed jus' sits back, an' picks off the cream."

"Whut's wrong with thet?" Hennessey demanded. "Won't say I'm right fond o' Jed myse'f, but a man's got a right to use his brains if everybody else is dumb enough, doesn't 'e?"

"Yeah," said Hart, "but not 'is gun. or 's gunmen. Now is jus' so happens, Benjie an' me, we made a purty good strike this trip, an' I didn't aim to give it away to Jed fer nothin'."

"He'd a paid ye," someone put in.

"Shore," Hart answered, "But thet's whar the catch come in. He'd a-paid me whut Bill Patchen said it was wuth . . . that is whut Patchen said to me. Happens we also hit upon a mine Jed bought up a leetle while back from a frien' o' mine. I know whut he got fer it, an' I know whut they wuz takin' out of it when we pass' by, and I didn' like the look of it, so I baited me a leetle trap fer Jed, an' he walked right into it. Ask 'im whats in that box he was so anxious git aholt of."

"OK, Jed," Hennessey's voice was getting sharper. 'Whut in tarnation *is* in thet box?"

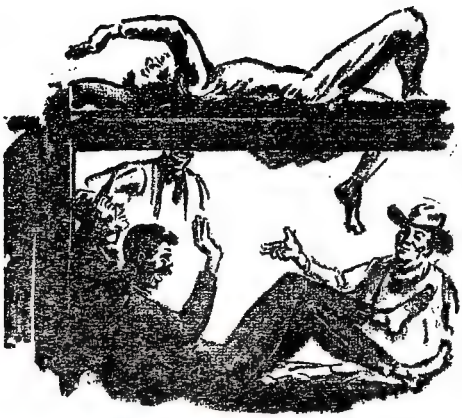
"High-grade ore." Jed spat it out." "High-grade from thet claim they staked. They wuz tryin' to pull suthin' over on me, an' oney gave Bill a few lowgrade hunks, keepin' all the good stuff to send off to some partners they got workin' with 'em."

Hennessey turned to Hart. "Thet right?" he demanded.

Hart laughed. "I tole you all, or Benjie tole you for me, whut wuz in thet box. Open it up an' fin' out if you want to." Two men went out ot bring the box in, and Hart continued. "If yore lookin' for the high-grade we brought back, I kin promise you you won't fin' it, not till I feel good an' ready to file thet claim, soon's we get a new assay officer out here."

The two men returned with the box, and everybody's attention turned to them while they pried it open, and pulled out the vari-colored stones

(Continued On Page 112)



Whizzers

By THE COWPOKE

I DON'T right know who the first man was, started folks spinning yarns out West, but I got a mighty good idea. The way I figure it, white men out there, they just naturally had to be better than the Indians at everything, and after they spent a couple nights around a warriors' campfire somewhere, they just took themselves back to their little old log cabins, and sat themselves down, and didn't stir again, until they'd dreamed up some tales to outdo the ones they'd heard the Indians tell 'em, and poker-face, too.

Used to be, you could find a beat-up old Indian in almost any town, stretched out on the curbstone after a rough night with the fire-water, and get him to spill a yarn but mostly nowadays, their sons have gone off to college someplace, and so much education seems to drive the story-relating part of a man clean out of his head. No room for both, I guess. Nowadays, if you really want to hear a yarn, spun out the way it ought to be, you might have to take yourself out to New Mexico, near the Yellowstone there, and make yourself some friends on the Navajo reserve.

Folks have been buying the blankets those Navajo women make, ever

(Continued On Page 108)

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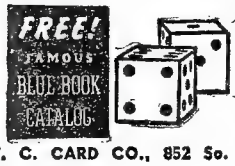

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 107)

since the Navajo fighters let anyone get close enough to offer a price, and one of the best stories they've got is about how the first blanket came to be made. Seems there was a woman from the Kisani, the Pueblo people, and when her ma and pa kicked the bucket it turned out none of the eligible gents amongst her own tribesmen wanted to marry up with her. So this gal picked up and took herself off to the Navajos, where she seemed to think she might make out a bit better in the marrying department.

But maybe on account of the Navajo females are not a-tall bad to look at, this Kisani kid had a pretty rough time of it. She went wandering around from one hohrahn to another, the hohrahns being those peculiar wooden houses the Navajos build, and she cooked and ground up corn, and gathered in berries, and did all kinds of work, but none of the gents would take to her somehow.

One day she went out to get herself a few fistfuls of gooseberries, but after being out the whole day long she only had one basket full, and it seems she got kind of discouraged and didn't much care did she ever go back there or not. She slept out on the prairie that night. Maybe she was trying to get folks worried about her, to make 'em ap-pree-ciate her more than they done, but if that was what she had in mind, it don't seem like it worked. Come morning, there wasn't any posse out hunting for her. She got up, and started out to walk in an easterly direction, and kept a-goin', till she saw a little round hole in the ground with smoke coming up out of it.

BEING A woman and with nothing to do, she just naturally had to take a look-see into that hole, and inside there was an old woman just sitting and spinning. When this Kisani woman's shadow fell into the room, the old lady looked up, and asked her to come in, right hospitable.

The gal insisted the hole wasn't

(Continued On Page 110)

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 108)

big enough for anybody at all to come in, so the old lady, she just huffed and puffed a little bit and by the judicious use of some considerable air pressure she appeared to carry in her lungs, she blew up that hole about four times as big as it had been at first. She blew out at it until it got to be a regular wide-open passageway, and on each side there was a ladder for the girl to go down by. She had her pick of a white ladder or a black one or a yellow or a blue.

Never did find out which ladder it was she used, but I never did hear the story told, either, without being told the colors of all those ladders, so I pass 'em on, for whatever information or pleasure them colors can give.

The gal came down and took a seat for herself to rest her bones, right next to the old lady. I don't know if you ever slept out over night on a prairie, but if you did, you'll be aware those bones must have needed some resting, and so it's most likely it took the little Indian gal some time to realize what a per-culiar set-up she had walked herself in to.

Pretty soon she must of caught on to the fact that this old lady was not any ordinary person such as you and me would meet, going for a walk on any nice day. She was the Spider Woman, and she was sitting there at her loom weaving a blanket. There don't seem to have been any great degree of conversation went on between the two ladies. They just sat there, and one of 'em weaved, and the other one watched, until the blanket was all done, and then the Spider Woman hiked herself up out of that hole, and took along with her a web she had handy.

She tossed up one end of that web to the sky, and got the sun nice and tight in to it, and then she give a yank on her end, and sure enough she'd pulled that hot old sun all the way clear over to the west. Then she came back inside, and pointed to the sunset and told the little Indian gal the sun was right low, an' she would do best to spend the night. Guess the old lady used to get pretty lonely sitting there weaving every day without

any company of any dee-scription a-tall.

WELL, AFTER a while, naturally enough, the Spider Man came home for dinner, and, naturally enough, too, he wasn't nearly so keen on having company as his Missus was. He asked who was the girl, and the old lady told him, and said they hated her up on the earth where she came from. Maybe the old man didn't like people much, on account of that seemed to sell him on the gal, and he let her stay.

Well, the little Indian gal stuck around with the Spider Woman for four days and four nights, and by that time she knew how to make three different kinds of blankets, and a very par-tic-yular kind of skirt called the Beautiful Design Skirt, for dancers to wear. After she learned all that, she finally decided she might get a right royal welcome to home, and picked up and went on out.

Back at the hohrahan, this Kisani woman went out doors, and set herself up a loom on two posts, the way the Navajo women still do, and she got some cotton from her hosts, and got to work. She started in to weave herself a black and white and yellow blanket out of the cotton. Just about as soon as she got really started, the other women-folk started dropping by to have a look-see, and when she had finished part of it, and there was a picture of a bird that showed through on both sides an other Kisani woman inquired where she had ack-quired this new knowledge.

But this little gal was not so dumb as to give away her trade secrets. She just up and told her lady friend she'd thought it up all by herself, and went right on weaving herself a Black Design Blanket.

Well the lady friend went a-scurryin' off, and she must of done some fancy talkin', because purty soon, a couple of Kisani men were there, askin' more questions, and looking things over pretty careful. They took in all they could, and hotfooted it back to their own claims to get to work, and first thing anybody knew, they were

(Continued On Page 112)

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 111)

turning out blankets and skirts too.

That wasn't the end of it, though. The Kisani girl must have liked all the attention she was getting because as soon as other folks knew how to make the blankets, she went right off back to the Spider Woman, and found out how to weave baskets, and wicker water-jars. She told the Spider Woman she'd taught blanket-weaving to the folks back home, and the old lady said that was fine and dandy, but told her to warn everybody always to leave a hole in the middle of the blanket. That was to let the evil spirits out, and it was very dangerous, the Spider Woman kept saying to make a blanket without a hole in it.

The gal went on back to the hohrahn, and showed the folks how to make the baskets, and warned them about the hole—but it never does say whether she finally got hersef hitched up to a man or not.

THE END

STRIKE 'IM OUT

(Continued From Page 106)

Hart had collected for two years to send his sister back east.

Down at the other end of the room where Jed and his two men sat, a low muttering started. Hart and Benjie were untied, and, carrying the box between them, started back to their hut.

"I'd kinda like to know myself where thet ore is, Hart." Benjie fumbled around for words a minute, then said. "I'm right sorry I didn't trust you, pard. Nex' time I'll remember I gotta count on you."

"Right glad I knew I could trust *you*," Hart answered. "Never could of handled all three of them without a shot like you to back me up. Drunk or sober, man, you shore can shoot."

He opened the door with one hand, then turned to Benjie grinning. "If yore wonderin' whar at our ore is, I cain't figger out how come you don't. If I'd a been sleepin' on rocks like you have, *I'd* a knowed it."

THE END

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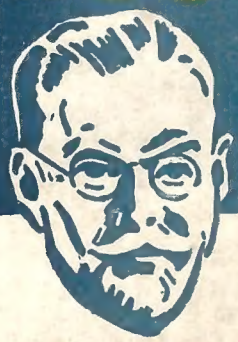

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